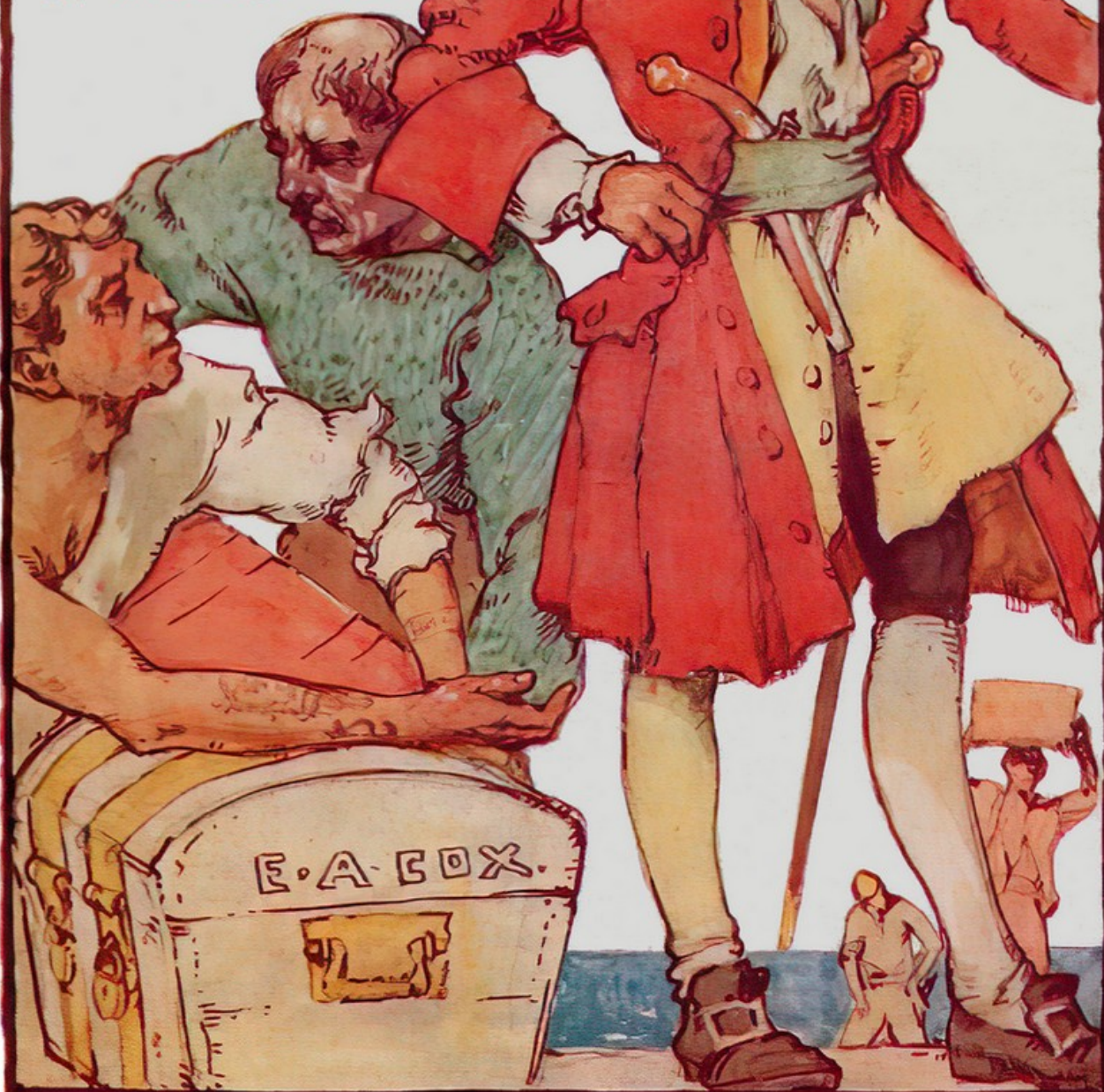
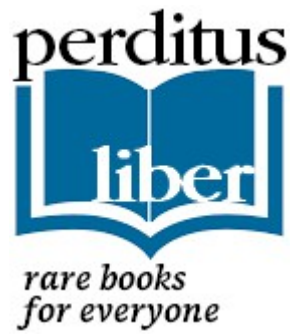


CURSED BE THE TREASURE



BY H. B. DRAKE



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by

H. B. Drake

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BY
H. B. DRAKE



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To
My Son, Terence Theodore

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PART ONE

MY FATHER

CHAPTER I

THE TAPPING AT THE WINDOW

LOOKING right back to the days of my childhood, the first beginnings of things are blurred and confused, but I must disentangle them as well as I may if I am to tell my story clearly and coherently. I know now that the story began long before I was born, but I must pick up the thread of it where it first crossed my path. And even that is difficult enough. For before I was conscious to the point of memory I was already enmeshed in a net of mystery woven long since of dark and incredible things. But to me they didn't seem dark and incredible, for they were with me before I could reason and distinguish, nor had my experience any touchstone by which to test or measure them.

I think perhaps I first began to take conscious stock of my surroundings on a certain night of wind and rain. For earlier events were with me but as shapeless shadows of memory, but from this night my life began to unfold before me like a clearly written book. I had been nursed in the atmosphere of mystery, though at this time, of course, such a term would have had no meaning for me, for nothing is strange to the inexperienced. But vaguely I was becoming accustomed to a life of sudden change and hiding and swift flight. My eyes

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were opening with growing consciousness to a world of passing lights and shadows, with nothing definite or stationary, but all in wavering motion. The one binding and constant element, the thread as it were which gave single consistency to the whole, was the presence of my father, whose laughter and gaiety, whose thrilling stories of pirates and smugglers and treasure-trove, acted rather than narrated with a dramatic realism that left them scored in burning pictures on my imagination, and whose strong and tender companionship to a child of five or six, set him central like the sun in my little world now growing out of chaos to some semblance of form and individuality.

Why this night above all nights should live in my memory as the first clear picture there, is perhaps due to the keener suffering I was called upon to endure, or perhaps to the fact that the shadowy pursuer who kept ever on

the road became this night not merely a name and a fear but a creature of flesh and blood.

The flight in the morning I don't remember distinctly, for that was much as others had been. My father had been playing with me at hide-and-seek, our favourite pastime, and one always full of thrill and strange romance, when he had crept up to me where I lay hidden, and putting his finger to his lips muttered, "Whist!"—glancing slowly round with infinite caution. All this I surmise, for it had happened so before, and I knew the procedure well. It meant that the mysterious enemy was on our trail again, and we must be away on the path without delay.

"Is it Shadow-of-Fear? " I said, creeping close to my father so as to whisper in his ear.

He nodded slowly, and looking very serious took me by the hand, and together we crawled away. It didn't seem in

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the least fantastic to me, for it had happened often before. It was indeed part of our game, for our hide-and-seek was no garden affair; we needed the whole of England for our playground. So once more we set out on our travels; and I didn't question how it was that everything was ready and in order, our cloaks being hidden in a bush near by, and my father's knapsack packed for the journey.

But on this occasion there was a difference, and it was probably this difference that stamped the affair on my mind. For usually we managed to cover our tracks after a day or two, but this time our pursuer seemed unusually tenacious of the scent, and for days we fled, doubling upon our path, plunging into woods, emerging at high roads where we obtained a lift on a passing cart or waggon, hiding for a day in a remote hamlet, burrowing through the twisting streets of a city, till at last it seemed to me that my whole life had been one long wandering, and I began to grow tired. It needed all my father's fun and exhaustless imagination to keep my heart tuned to the wearying adventure.

On the night I speak of I remember I was crying with fatigue and cold and hunger, dragging at my father's hand as he plodded me remorselessly onward down a drenched and dripping woodland path. His buoyant laugh, usually so exhilarating, failed to shake my drooping spirits into cheerfulness, for indeed I was bitterly miserable. My feet were numbed to solid lumps of aching cold, and the wet twigs that wisped across my face

hurt cruelly. Even the hand that my father held was bitter with a throbbing half-consciousness of animation, and the other hung nerveless at my side. So I whimpered and toddled on. But I remember feeling no unkindness towards my father. Not for a moment did my heart cry blame on him; for babe as I was he had successfully impressed me with the

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sense of strange pursuit that ever hung upon our flight. It was something entirely beyond his power, something big like fate or death. Tired and miserable, I knew I must on, for behind us there were creatures of the dark scenting stealthily upon our track. I heard their sniffing through the pauses of the wind, and more terrible still their laughter, cackling brutally in our wake. This made me quicken my pace, though it was pain to do so, and clutch my father's hand more tightly in both my own.

"Shadow-of-Fear?" I would say.

"Yes, Tommy, yes," he would answer. "But he's lost the trail this time."

Shadow-of-Fear was the name my father had given to our secret and inexorable enemy.

I stumbled on as well as I could through the black wood and the drenching rain, and then I must have slipped, for I found myself swinging from my father's supporting arm. He tried to set me on my feet again, but I felt faint, and the little strength had quite ebbed from my limbs; and my father with boisterous tenderness stooped and lifted me on to his back, and with a "Courage, Tommy!" strode on with redoubled speed. I hung my dripping arms down his shoulders, taking care not to press them against his throat and hinder his breathing, for I had had experience in this kind of travel. And I laid my streaming cheek upon his head, and felt the jogging motion of his walk lull me to a disturbed kind of half sleep, full of waking visions and drowsy dreams, where great blazing fires and the smell of sizzling and delicious foods mingled with alarms and pattering feet and gripping hands thrust suddenly out of the dark.

At last I must have yielded to my fatigue and slept soundly, while the rain beat unheeded upon my face, for I woke to a real fire that fumed up smokily with sputtering crackles and

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fitful flames, bright enough to show that all around was dark. I couldn't see my father, but I heard him moving behind me, and a sudden light told me

that he had lit our travelling lantern, for yellow swinging beams played round our shelter as he hung the lantern from the roof.

I looked about me sleepily. Evidently we were in some sort of hut, though where in the whole of England I hadn't the faintest notion. Outside the wind and rain were still at their old struggle, slashing and crying through the trees in great rushing gusts that grew out of nowhere and raced away again. My father seeing me move threw himself down beside me, and stripping off my sodden clothes began to arrange them round the fire. From his knapsack he pulled out a rug which he had managed to keep reasonably dry through the drenching tempest, and wrapped my naked body in its comforting folds, and the touch of its dry softness was bliss unspeakable after the soaking discomfort of the rain. I smiled up into his face with all my love, and for reward felt his arms about me, and his wet cheek pressed to mine, while he murmured, "That's my brave little boy!" So wonderful was my father that words like these were magical, and my ebbing courage flowed again. Then he took my hands between his own and chafed them vigorously back to life, and I don't think I cried at the exquisite pain as the blood flushed slowly back to my white finger-tips. And all the time he was talking in his rapid and thrilling way, making a story of the adventure we had passed through, and telling how we had baffled our pursuer at last.

I was too weary to pay much heed to his rattling talk. I know that the fire as it blazed up more strongly and brightly, triumphing over the soaked twigs and branches which my father had scrambled together, thawed my limbs deliciously. And soon I was in a glow of steamy warmth, and nodded

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sleepily, while my father, still chatting in his restless way, prepared some soup. The hot savoury stuff was the last touch necessary to complete comfort, and forgetting with the ease of childhood the dreary tramp through the storm I gave myself up unresistingly to the luxury of sleep. But my sleep wasn't completely unbroken. It seemed to surge over me like great waves, and whenever I floated up to the surface I became aware of my father's voice still droning out the story of our flight. He must have been talking to prevent himself from sleeping, for once I seem to remember hearing him muttering, "I must keep awake, I must keep awake," and sometimes when I awoke from my doze he was pacing the hut, or turning the clothes before the fire.

I had one longer spell of wakefulness while it was still dark. The wind had dropped, and my father had ceased to prattle. The complete silence, together with the cutting pressure of cold air against my cheek, had probably aroused me more alertly than usual, for of a sudden I felt wideawake. I looked round for my father, but he wasn't in the hut. The lantern was no longer alight, and the fire was smouldering low. The door stood open, and the utter blackness of the woodland seemed banked up against it like a barricade. For a moment the fear of loneliness was upon me, and I would have cried out, but just then my father returned with a bundle of faggots, which he tossed on to the failing fire. There was a smother of smoke and steam and a loud hissing, before the red flames broke through again.' ‘

“What! Awake, Tommy?” said my father, seeing me rub my eyes, which were smarting from the fumes.

“Awake, daddy,” I said, blinking up at him with a smile.

He shut the door, and carefully secured it with a stout piece of timber. I noticed too that he had hung his cloak, now dry,

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over the little solitary pane of glass which was all the hut possessed in the way of a window.

“Time to dress, Tommy,” he said, helping me pull on my stockings, which were almost toasted by the fire and felt comfortingly warm. I reached for my shirt and breeches, and slowly drew them on, my eyes half shut, for I would willingly have lain down again for a further spell of sleep. I pushed my arms into my jacket, and looking round for my cloak saw it hanging on the wall opposite the door. I was rising to get it when my father said, “Ah, not that just yet. We won't start till morning, but best be ready.” He added, “There's a big hole there, Tommy. Keeping out the wind; the cold wind, Tommy, with the sharp white teeth. It's there behind your cloak, all ready to bite.”

He snapped his teeth and shuddered, while I threw my head on his arm as he sat beside me, and chuckled delightedly. For it was always in this way that he spoke of the simplest things; never to frighten, but to give just that touch of dramatic and imaginative charm which childhood thirsts for. And it was this magic spell which he cast over our life of hard wanderings and sudden flights that changed a bitter reality into a wonderful game.

He was off again with some story or other, and though I tried to keep awake so as not to miss the precious recital, yet sleep was still heavy in my eyes, and my head nodded. I must have been tired indeed, for my father could tell a story with such thrill and vigour, his expression changing with every phase ;and mood, that the thing became a living picture. At least it was so to me, and bed had no attraction while I was away with my father seeking treasure on far-away seas. But this night I missed the better part of the story. I only heard a word here and there. I remember there was a cave, and

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a conspiracy, and a terrible crime, but how the story went I couldn't follow. And then in a more wakeful moment I heard my father saying, "This is how he looked at me." I blinked a sleepy eye up at him, and suddenly started into complete consciousness, for used as I was to his extraordinary facial contortions when dramatizing his incidents, I had never seen him wear such a look of frightfulness as he wore now. His hair was standing up stupidly, with one lank lock pulled slant-wise across his forehead, almost hiding one eye. His lips, usually so full of laughter, had slipped to a loose and slobbering imbecility. His cheeks were drawn in haggard lines, pulling down the flesh beneath his eyes, which contrasted raw and red with the staring whites. The whole expression was one of blank idiocy, except for a tell-tale glitter of devilish cunning which lurked in the corners of his upturned eyes.

I stared at him in horror. In all his many disguises I had seen him in nothing that had suggested that his face could be distorted to such a hideous caricature of itself. And yet it was hardly a caricature, for it was all but unrecognizable. I believe that no other eyes but mine could have penetrated that mask. It was only his even voice repeating, "This is how he looked at me," that reassured me somewhat.

"But who?" I asked, clutching him.

"Who? The Mad Captain. I was telling you, Tommy."

"Yes, yes," I said eagerly, hoping to pick up the thread of the story as he continued.

My father's face gradually righted itself as he proceeded:

"You see, Tommy, he had left them alone there to die; and that was a terrible thing." His voice was hushed and tense in a way I can't describe, but which held me in a spell of expectation. "And he knew they could

never get away. And they had no food, and they would starve. And that's a horrible

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slow death, Tommy. And if they cried out, no one would hear them. Their voices would be like whispers from the stars.”

“Ah,” I said, “the treasure,” trying to link on to the lost fragment without my father’s needing to repeat it, for I knew he hated to return upon his narrative when once well under way. I can see now how necessary it was for him to live in his incident, and repetition spoilt his dramatic flow.

So there we sat together, gazing into the red flames, with the night outside very hushed and secret, far away from the world, with somewhere behind us our baffled pursuer scenting along a false track, and my father in his tense and vivid voice telling an old story of crime and madness and remorse.

“Yes, treasure, Tommy,” he answered me. “They were there with the gold and the rubies and the diamonds, trapped in the cave, with twenty tons of rock at its mouth, and with nothing to eat, and hunger gnawing like wolves inside them, and no one to hear them crying day after day; and their voices growing weaker and dryer, just like croaking birds, Tommy, till one by one they dropped down to die. It must have been terrible all alone there, Tommy. Can’t you see them, with bruised torn hands, beating at the rock, tugging and beating? And the gold lying quiet there, how it must have said to them, ‘Fools! Fools! Fools!’ And the last man, Tommy, when the rest were all dead! I think he must have gone mad. Can you see him, groping from body to body, and crying pitifully because they wouldn’t move or speak to him; all lying so sad and still and saying not a word? And how he must have sprung away from them and hammered at that rock, and fallen down faint and beaten, and wrung his battered hands, laughing like a madman, pulling at his hair. The last man, all alone, with the treasure and the secret and the dead men; till he grew thin and faint and tired, and lay down with the rest.”

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“And the Mad Captain?” I asked, thirsting for details.

“Ah, he!”—and my father’s face, which had softened, became rightful again, till for very face I crept closer to him, and gripped him convulsively. He went on in his hushed, tense voice: “It was like this he looked at me

when he told me the story. For you see, Tommy, he could hear the voices calling to him; and if he shut his ears against them, there were terrible curses screaming inside his head, for he knew he had left them there to die. And in the night he saw them there, growing thinner and whiter and all wasted with hunger. And he counted the days, and said, 'Now they must be dead!' But still he heard them crying to him; most terrible and piteous it was. And he knew they were dead and were following him, and he couldn't hide from them anywhere. And sometimes they screamed at him, and sometimes they laughed; a hollow wicked laughter, he told me, and wondered I couldn't hear it. And then he knew he could never rest again, but must up and away day after day and night after night, with the dead men chasing him and crying to him and mocking his madness. And so he was whipped on from place to place, never resting. For the terrible voices broke into his sleep like a cry of hounds, and the dead faces peered horribly at him through the dark, and the room was always full of moaning and knocking and a shuffling of feet."

If I felt frightened at this strange recital in the gloom of our wayside hut, lit fitfully as it was by the red leaping flames of the fire, which threw distorted shadows on the walls which a boy's imagination might work into terrible fantasies—if I felt frightened it was with a pleasing fear; for I delighted to feel the stirring of unseen things about me, when safe in the comforting security of my father's presence. I remember glancing cautiously around me into the shadowy corners, half

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hoping to see some white and horrible face gazing out at me; and I strained my ears to catch some echo of the cryings and meanings which my father had been speaking of. The wind had quite dropped, and the night was perfectly still, with a sort of waiting uneasy stillness; and I thought I could hear a movement in the darkness outside. But my father was continuing: "And when he lit his lamp the blackness through the window was full of beckoning hands, and when he blew the lamp out for very fear the room was alive with creeping feet. And sometimes he felt cold fingers on his neck, and sometimes breath in his hair, and sometimes ..."

At this moment there was a tapping at the window.

My father looked round sharply, and the words died on his lips. He clutched my arm with a hard grip, and I knew my part was to be perfectly still. And then suddenly he let out a bitter cry, and under cover of it had

pushed me behind my cloak and through the hole in the wall. The cloak followed, and he hung his own coat in its place; and a moment later the knapsack was bundled after me. I crouched motionless in the cold, with my cloak pulled about my shoulders; and still my father was crooning in a kind of unearthly sob, broken now and again by short little dry chucklings. I summoned courage to widen with my fingers a slit in his coat through which I could peep into the hut. I caught one glimpse of my father's face in the firelight; again it was drawn with haggard madness, but I thought the cunning in the eye was sharper than before. He was sitting in front of the fire with his knees huddled up to his chin, peering slantwise behind him towards the door. I looked towards the door; the barrier was down.

Again there was a tapping at the window. The sound came to me from the outside. And then I heard a low wail, "For the mercy of heaven, let me in, let me in." My father

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moaned in reply, hugging himself convulsively, and finishing on a shriek that broke into a hideous laughter.

All this was a new game on me, and curiosity rather than fear was the uppermost feeling in my mind. Indeed, the most frightening thing was the stillness of the woodland behind me. It seemed as though a great hand had the world in its grip, and a loosening of the fingers would set the air into sudden and startling motion.

I heard a shuffling at the other side of the hut, and the wall shook as though a body had fallen against it. I looked through the slit in the coat; the door was slowly opening.

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CHAPTER II

BITE-IN-THE-DARK

WHAT I expected to see I hardly know. I think probably I expected nothing visible, but merely that the hut would suddenly fill with wailings and demoniac cries, for the Mad Captain with his unseen tormentors was still beating in my mind. And something like a doubt crossed my thoughts that perhaps my father too was fleeing from some such spirits of remorse and retribution. But certainly I wasn't expecting the miserable and decrepit hag who crawled out of the blackness in through the open doorway, delaying on the threshold to push the crazy door flat against the wall before venturing through, as though suspecting some hidden snare.

It seemed an anticlimax to my strung imagination, and I could have laughed aloud, but something in my father's attitude of stealthy watchfulness held my lips dumb, though I was on the point of pushing back through the wall to say, "How stupid, daddy!" as though a splendid game had been spoilt. For the woman was just an ordinary beggar, very dirty, very ragged, very weary and miserable, and so weak that she must have fallen, and now could only crawl to the comforting welcome of the fire; it was her body I had felt shake the hut as she had collapsed. And yet my father's face didn't change, but his fingers played foolishly together about his throat. He was usually so kind to the friendless and helpless that I expected to see him rise and help her in; and I began to think

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that I too should like his permission to return to my warm place out of the biting night air that chilled my hands and feet. But his face still wore its imbecile expression, and as the woman crept up to him he shrank away from her towards my side of the fire, chattering incomprehensibly, and watching her slyly out of the corner of his eyes.

His strange manner must have startled her, for she made a circuit to avoid him, but with eyes fixed steadily upon him still moved slowly towards the fire, till soon they were both crouched one on either side of it, crossing glances through the flames. My father was seated with his back to me, but with his face half averted from the woman so that I could see it in profile; but the woman I had in full view. She was moaning weakly like a

dumb creature in pain, and her hands were spread out tremblingly to the fire, as though greedy for its warmth. Her fingers were yellow and thin and withered. She was wearing a kind of bonnet from under which stray wisps of ragged hair straggled down over her face. The bones in her cheeks showed sharply, throwing deep shadows into the hollows behind, and her eyes beneath her great brows were like pits of blackness, occasionally gleaming with points of red as the firelight caught her pupils. And all the time as she warmed herself, trembling and complaining in broken whimpers, she watched my father, who for his part was edging farther and farther from her, jabbering stupidly and gurgling with low, throaty laughter. And so there they sat like animals in a cage, and although I had never seen anything quite so harmless and commonplace as the forlorn waif who had just crawled into our shelter, yet it seemed to me that the two as they fronted each other were like beasts preparing for a spring, and the woman's whine and my father's idiot cacklings were like the growls of coming battle.

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I became spellbound watching them, wondering what would happen. I forgot the cold; and the immensity of blackness all around me held no hidden fears, for all my mind was on that strange pair in the hut, shining red with the leaping flames, and looming black as the fire slackened. This was the best game I had seen, and I was an enthralled spectator eagerly watching for the moves. And, though I knew it not, blacker than the night about me was the shadow of an old crime that had caught me in its darkness and would bring on my head also a measure of doom.

It is impossible for me to say just what were my feelings at the time, for the incident has been so often rehearsed by my father with such dramatic distinctness that I hardly remember what I saw through the slit in the coat, and what I learnt afterwards; also I have come to regard it so much from my father's standpoint rather than from my own that it is difficult to disentangle my own feelings from his, and in telling what happened I may seem to be reading more into the affair than I could possibly have comprehended at the time.

But this I know, that as the woman spread her hands to the blaze, whimpering curses against the cold and the night and the ill folk that grudged a starving body a bit o' warmth, and drove you from their doors without a bite or a sip, I could see her furtively scanning the hut, searching

out, as it seemed to me, possible hiding-places. Why I cannot say, but the fear grew in my heart that it was me she was looking for, and as the black hollows where her eyes were hidden rested on the coat behind which I crouched a shudder passed through me, for I remember how suddenly the fire lit up her eyes in their dark caverns, and the fierce red balls seemed menacingly fixed on me. I shrank back into the night, but not so far that I couldn't still with difficulty see into the hut.

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And while the woman whined and droned her endless tale of wrong my father was muttering and chuckling insanely in his corner, puffing out his cheeks, blowing in his hands, sometimes leaning forward and grinning amiably at the old hag, and sometimes snarling malignantly at her, or beating and clutching at imaginary tormentors. But I thought he watched her all the while, and took due note of her peering and prying.

There was a bundle of straw and leaves and branches and other lumber in the corner behind the woman, and her eyes were often turned to it, wondering, I thought, what it might conceal. I felt a thrill of delight to know that if she thought I was hidden there she would have a fine disappointment when she looked for me; for look for me I knew she would, so convinced had I become that she was wondering where I was hidden. For if she was hunting for my father she must know that I should be with him. And sometimes she gazed at the cloak hung over the window; perhaps I was there. And sometimes at the coat that concealed my hiding-place; but it hung flat against the wall, and she couldn't know of the hole behind it. I triumphed in my security with all the joy that I had learnt from the exciting games of hide-and-seek which I had played with my father. I nearly laughed aloud when the old crone, unable to restrain her curiosity, so it seemed to me, rose shivering, and diving her hands into the pile of lumber seized an armful of wood and threw it on the fire. She returned to her place, still whimpering, but more angrily than before and with greater vigour. My father only chuckled softly, and subsided into snarlings as though the affair hadn't disturbed him. But I knew he had noted it.

How it was that with nothing happening the atmosphere grew more strained with each moment I can't explain. I felt that something was bound to happen, and it would come

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quickly. I became more and more convinced that the old woman was searching for me; but the knowledge was exhilarating, not frightening. I was used to being hunted, and knew the thrill of hiding. And then my father was there to protect me if the game became too serious.

And so the droning and the mummerly continued; and then the hag, still shivering with cold, rose and twitched down my father's cloak from the window and threw it over her shoulders. Foiled again, I thought, as she crouched back into her place; and my father hissed between his teeth, and made a sudden grab at something in the fire. Then his attention became fixed on the roof, though I could see nothing there, and with complete indifference he left his hand singeing in the flames. I could see the hag watching him, and behind her inscrutable eyes she must have been wondering whether this was a supreme bluff or a genuine piece of idiocy. But my father never winced. Slowly it seemed his attention became drawn to his roasting flesh, while I shuddered at the pain of it. But he looked down on his hand, and then calmly drew it up to his eyes as though dumbly questioning what had been hurting him. And suddenly he looked across at the woman, and with a frightful cry hurled himself at her through the fire. But she was too quick for him, and nimbly avoiding him slipped round to my side of the fire, still ready to spring away if he attacked her again; and while my father blundered stupidly across the hut, and collapsed against the wall, grumbling and shaking, I saw the hag slip a knife back into the folds of her dress. It was real war, I knew then; and my blood sang through my ears.

If my father had thought to take her by surprise he had failed. But still there was no motive for the attack except the rage of a lunatic. If she was questioning his identity the

secret wasn't betrayed. But I began to fear for myself, for I knew she would find some pretext to whip away the coat that was hiding me, and the tell-tale hole would be revealed. And now she was on my side of the fire. She wouldn't even have to pass my father to get at me. My father must have realized this too, for he seemed to me to be gathering for another spring. And I think the woman knew it, and was determined to peep behind the coat before the tables were again reversed. Her hand crept behind her towards me. Instinctively I clutched at the coat, and felt something hard in the pocket. It was my father's pistol, I knew well; a prohibited toy, but one

eagerly desired. I had some idea, as a child will, of playing the hero; and I slipped the pistol from the pocket. It was easily done, for the woman's eyes were on my father, though her hand was creeping ever nearer to the coat. I tugged at the hammer of the great thing, and with difficulty cocked it, and held it with a shaky hand. And then what happened I couldn't see. My attention was on the pistol, when all at once the hut was in an uproar. I think the woman must have clutched at the coat and my father sprung at the same moment. At any rate there was the thud of a body against me, and my hand seemed to be wrenched from my arm, while a splitting roar seemed to burst my head in pieces. I fell back dazed, but rather interested and frightened, and felt my father, stumbling through the dark, trip and almost fall cross me, crying, "Tommy! Tommy!"

He took me back into the hut, and hugged me convulsively when he found me unhurt. The woman lay writhing on the ground, with a dreadful dark stain upon her breast. My father's hand was gashed across; and on the floor lay a blood-stained knife.

And now my father from pretence seemed to become a

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madman in reality. He laughed and shouted and stamped the floor where the wretched victim lay feebly cursing and spitting blood. His evil joy was terrible, and frightened me even more than the blood-drenched figure at his feet. And then he began heaping the fire into a tremendous blaze, and scattering flaming brands against the walls, till at last the crazy structure began to smoulder, and then a sudden sharp flame or two shot up. And all the while he shouted and laughed, cheering on the growing conflagration, till the place was full of choking smoke, and our eyes ran streaming, and the heat scorched our cheeks. And at last he seized me and swung me to his shoulders, and raced away with me through the darkness, now beginning to be touched with grey between the trees; and soon behind us the glare of the burning hut was like a cruel red eye blinking at us out of the blackness.

As we pushed free of the woodland into the grey and open morning my father set me down, and looking back heaved a great sigh and wiped his brow. Then he seized me by the hand and danced me round repeating excitedly, "We're free, Tommy, we're free!"

"Was it Shadow-of-Fear?" I asked.

My father's face darkened. "Shadow-of-Fear never dies," he answered. "But we shall escape him now." And he smiled again.

“But that,” I said, “who is that?”

“Ah, that,” he laughed, “was the old witch, Bite-in-the-Dark.”

CHAPTER III

THE DOLPHIN INN

I SUPPOSE it's natural enough that the events of that night should stand out in my memory with vivid distinctness, while the six or seven years that followed have only left a general impression of their progress. I can't possibly say where our wanderings led us, for my father still seemed ill at ease if he lingered too long at one place. But now they became less harassing. We didn't steal away at the dead of night, and hide for days in the woods. We journeyed in comfort with horses or by coach, and sheltered by the welcome of great inn fires.

I remember that this was a time of intensive education for me; not so much in book-learning—though my father taught me my letters, and was even anxious that I should master Latin—but rather in the arts of hiding, tracking, and every kind of physical prowess. It seems to me now that I had the training of a Redskin rather than of an English boy; but I know I entered into it with relish, and pleased my father by my precocious skill in climbing, in fighting with the knife, and especially in swimming and diving.

We still kept up our tremendous games of hide-and-seek, stalking each other across great stretches of country, and even taking refuge on the sea. My father had a power of disguise which was baffling in its completeness, and in hunting him I would frequently ask news of him from some wayside beggar

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or passing carter to find afterwards that I had been speaking to my father himself. But I soon found a way of penetrating his disguises, because the scar of the burn and the knife across his left hand betrayed him to me, and I learnt to suspect anyone who hid his left hand or wore gloves. And this betraying mark was disconcerting to him; not so much, I think, because it discovered him to me, as because he was afraid that it might be a witness against him when he needed concealment. He tried every means to cover the traces of the tell-tale burn. The gash of the knife wasn't so serious as it lay across the palm, and could be hidden by holding the hand half-shut. But the scar of the burn spread over the back of his hand and up three fingers.

He devised stains and dyes and paints, and at last did manage to cover the blemish from all but very curious eyes, but naturally the treatment wasn't permanent, nor could it be applied in a hurry. Generally he wore gloves.

I don't know to this day the route of our wanderings. My sense of direction was usually good enough to tell me whether we were travelling north or south, but actually where we were at any particular time I seldom knew. Except when we returned to the Dolphin Inn. I knew that through much acquaintance; for however far afield we strayed we were sure to return to it sooner or later.

It was a tumble-down, neglected hostelry that seemed to have known better days. I think its prosperity waned with the suppression of the smugglers. For it lay so remote and in so wild a country that I can't conceive how the patronage of the road alone could have ever maintained it. Indeed, you had to be lost before you could find it. A straggling path led up to it from a rocky shore through a dense patch of woodland, and the only dwellings for miles were a few miserable fishermen's huts and a forest shack or two.

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But I was always glad to be back there, for the country was an ideal playground for a boy trained as I had been. There was the wonderful flitting life of the woods, secret and passionate, which stirred something deep within me to a yearning sympathy. And then there was the sea with its rocky wall where the great waves raced and burst, sucking back down the green and clinging weeds to gather-strength for a-fresh spring. I haunted the wild coast till I thought I knew every bay and reach and pool, and where one could venture at low water, and where the cliffs could be scaled. And my father Was pleased beyond measure and encouraged me in my explorations, greeting me as I scrambled back for a late supper with, "Well, Tommy, what have you found to-day?"

But I never seemed to find what he was sending me in search of; for that there was something hidden on that coast for which he was hunting I soon began to realize.

The night was almost as wonderful as the day. For first came my lesson in fighting with the knife, a time of glorious excitement. In our combats we used folded lengths of paper so that we could fight with vigour but without danger of accidents. What added zest to the game was that my father had promised me a shiny new knife of my own when I had succeeded in hitting

him three times over the heart. I remember my dancing exultancy when I scored my first success, but after that he became more cautious, and the second blow was more difficult of attainment. And then when we had finished our combat came the hour of the evening story.

The days at the Dolphin Inn were never long enough for me, and the only time, I think, when I really felt resentment against my father was when he announced that we must be away again. I could see no reason for it. I had begun to

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understand that once—and long enough ago it seemed to me now—my father had been pursued by some strange and relentless enemy; but, I reasoned, wasn't that enemy safely dead? The only answer that I received from my father when I put the question to him was the somewhat enigmatic, "Ghosts, Tommy."

"Ghosts?" I said inquiringly.

"Sometimes the dead will rise," he announced in his hushed, mysterious voice, "and sometimes," he added, "the dead will leave the living behind them."

All I could gather was that he was vaguely uneasy that the pursuer was still on his track, though there had been no whisper of it for several years. For once after a long reverie he suddenly roused himself, and looking keenly at me said, "Tommy, was he lying still?"

I didn't understand; and repeated, "Still, daddy?"

He laughed a little, realizing the incomprehensibility of his question; and taking me by the shoulders he said slowly, "Now think, Tommy. When we left him in the hut, was he lying still?"

"He?" I said. "You mean she, daddy?"

"Ah, she," he laughed, "the old witch, Bite-in-the-Dark."

Now the picture was very clear in my mind that the old crone was not lying still as we broke away from the blaze; and as my father asked me the question I could see her, with infinite pain, slowly dragging herself along the floor. My imagination, alarmed probably by the intensity of my father's eagerness, must have exaggerated the impression, for I could almost picture her crawling from the door. But all I said was, "No, daddy; I saw her move."

"Ha!" he exclaimed, turning away; and then swinging round added impressively, "Tommy, always make sure."

“But, daddy,” I cried, “is she still alive? Will she find. us?”

“No, no, Tommy,” he answered easily, patting my head, “she can’t be alive. But,” he added, “I haven’t seen her ghost.”

I took him to mean that he couldn’t be certain of her death till he had seen her disembodied spirit; a theory that seemed by no means fantastic to me; for it was part of my conception of ghosts that they would haunt their murderers.

And that closed the subject. Except that I was puzzled and disturbed; firstly because I didn’t quite understand my father’s reference to ghosts, and secondly because he had spoken of the old witch as he. Was he thinking of Shadow-of-Fear, or was it indeed a man that we had killed?

However, we set off again on our wanderings, and I eagerly looked out for signs of the return to the *Dolphin* Inn, for I loved the place above all others that I knew, and I wanted to find what the secret was which my father was trying to unravel.

Now the signs of the return to the *Dolphin* were two. One was the approach of summer, and the other was that my father would begin to grow a beard. For elsewhere he went clean-shaven, but to the *Dolphin* he always masked his face in a thick black barbous growth which I suppose was his particular disguise for that corner of the world. So when I saw the razor had been laid aside, and my father’s face changed from white to blue, and gradually sank concealed beneath a stubbly brush of beard and whisker, I knew we should soon be tramping back to the beloved *Dolphin*. And I was more excited than usual at the prospect. Perhaps my spirit could scent the coming adventures from afar; or perhaps merely I was beginning to delight in my precocious strength of body; for though barely turned thirteen I had the girth of a boy of fifteen. And with

the summer we were there again, and I took up the thread of my life where I had laid it down, initiating what was to be a memorable season by scoring the second stroke of the three that were to win me my knife.

We had one room at the *Dolphin*, up a flight of stairs and below us was the great kitchen which served as bar for the few odd fishermen who formed almost the only patrons of the inn. Occasionally rougher men from over-sea would break the sleepy quiet of the place. Where they hailed from

I didn't know, and didn't seek to enquire. They seemed fierce folk, but kindly enough, tossing huge jests at each other which I didn't understand, but which were always greeted by immense bursts of throaty laughter. We could hear them through the floor of our room if we lay with our ears to the boards; and I remember that whenever they came my father used to vanish during the day, leaving me to my own devices.

Not that I ever saw much of these swarthy strangers, for they came with the morning and vanished with the night; and my father, in that impressive way he knew so well how to employ, warned me to keep well to the windward of them. But once in my ramblings I came face to face with old Dirk Stormaway, whom I had always taken to be the chief of the mysterious band. My first thought was that I had blundered inexcusably, for it was part of my training to scent instinctively the presence of a stranger, and here I had tumbled almost into his arms, not in the least aware of his nearness to me. He thrust out a huge hand and seized me by the shoulder, gazing deep into my eyes with a savage intentness which I returned with interest.

"Wull," he drawled slowly, "an' who be ye?"

Now among the few precepts my father had drilled into hie was one never to be disconcerted in an unexpected crisis, and

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another was to meet danger with a smile. So I answered with a child's impertinence, "Maybe I'm my father's son."

He was chewing something mechanically in his mouth, and at my answer he turned his head and spat, and I thought I saw the least of wrinkles pucker the furrows round his eyes.

At length, "Yus," he said, "an' wull you may be." And after a pause he added, "An' who's your father?"

"Maybe," I began; but the light in his eyes hardened, and his grip tightened, as though to warn me there was danger in carrying a joke too far. Instinct told me that the answer direct was the safest course now; and I said, "He's the gentleman at the inn."

"Heh!" was the reply; but the hand still held me, and the chewing didn't stop.

"An' what's he doing hereabouts, anyway?" was the next question.

Now this was disconcerting, for to tell the truth I didn't know, and my father hadn't enlightened me. Also I began to suspect that under the

circumstances the truth might be dangerous knowledge. For that my father was hunting diligently on the trace of some secret I had assumed as a fact by now. And might it not be that the secret was somehow connected with these men? Didn't he always vanish when they appeared?

I felt myself shaken, and the eyes were fiercely fixed on me from under the man's savage brows. "Come now; what's he doing hereabouts?" he repeated; adding, "An' see here, kiddy, if ye don't tell me the truth on't an' no humbug, I'll crack your back like a stick." His other arm came out, and I felt myself slowly bending in his tremendous hands.

"Why," I cried, again summoning what impudence I could, though I was terribly alarmed by now, "he's a poet, he is."

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"A what?" cried Dirk.

He was evidently taken aback, and I felt my body free again.

"He's a poet," I repeated. "He tells stories—writes," I corrected hurriedly.

Somehow my own lie seemed suddenly very like the truth to me. For that my father could tell stories as no one else could, I well knew; and that he carried pen and paper with him, and a slender selection of books, I also knew. I wondered for half a moment whether I had unawares pitched on the truth.

Dirk wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and said with bitter scorn, "Ah, I know the likes of him. Gets the yarns out of chaps like us, and dishes them up fer the swell blokes. *Kah!*" he ejaculated with unction, "they don't mind the reading of 'em, but we what has the doing ..." He drew his hand across his throat, and his meaning was unmistakable.

At this I felt a surging indignation on my father's account. The man seemed to me to have insulted him, and I said, "You'd better not say that to my father."

"Oho," he laughed, "I'd better not, hadn't I? An' what for no?"

Then I realized I had said more than I should have done, and as though I had forgotten my remark I cried to cover my mistake, "You can't catch me." I ducked under his grabbing hand, and was away.

Looking back I saw him spring up to watch me, and then he started on my track, whether in fun or earnest I didn't know. I gave him a good run, that much I remember, making for the rocks where I thought my nimbleness would be to my advantage; but he was up with me too soon,

and I was forced to scramble up a tree into the high top branches where I knew

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he couldn't follow. But he didn't attempt to pursue. He stood below and shouted at me good-humouredly to come down and he wouldn't hurt me. I was suspicious at first, but what was I to do? Down I must come at the last. So I put a good face on the matter, and slid down at his feet.

As it happened my confidence was well rewarded. He didn't grab at me as I had half expected, but with hands on hips stood grinning down at me, and after a long survey said, "Wull, an' what else can you do, since you're such a nippy 'un?"

"Oh," I cried, "I can swim, and dive and—and I can fight."

"Pity if you couldn't," he put in, "seeing as what a world you live in."

"I fight with the knife," I said.

"The devil you do!" he replied.

In my belt I carried a wooden knife which I had whittled myself, and this I drew and rushed in on Dirk to show that my boast was no idle one. But he was too quick for me, and seized my wrist in true fashion. At the same moment he drew a cutlass and flourished it glitteringly over my head. I think he was surprised when I sprang and seized his wrist as my father had taught me, though of course he wrenched himself free with a single twist, at the same time releasing my imprisoned arm.

Slowly he pushed his weapon back into his belt, and said, "Wull, you're a smart 'un," nodding his head appraisingly, and gazing at me as though pondering some problem. Then he muttered, "Yus, the kid's worth it," and this time drawing a dagger from his great sea-boot said, "See here, kiddy, I'll show you a trick worth learning."

Now all this while my conceit had been steadily flattered into arrogance, for a child knows well enough when he is being admired, and it was evident to me that for some reason or

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other Dirk was pleased and surprised at my prowess. And I was all attention as he explained the manoeuvre. It was simple enough in theory, but difficult in execution. The idea was to lunge with the right hand, and, as your opponent seized your wrist, to slip your knife into your left hand and drive home. The danger was that it left your enemy's knife hand unguarded,

and success was dependent upon swiftness, accuracy, and complete surprise. Dirk demonstrated the trick to me, and for a long while we combated there in the woodland till he thought I had learnt my lesson well enough; and at length thrusting back his weapon he gave a glance at the sun, and with a gruff farewell left me. He turned after a few yards and threw back at me, “An’ if you try to follow me, I’ll break your back like a stick.”

I shouted after him, “I’d knife you first,” at which he laughed; but again he turned and said, “An if you tell a soul you’ve seen me, even that precious father of yours, I’ll ...” but he didn’t finish his threat; for I think he only had one, and he had already used it. He growled and tramped away. But I didn’t follow, for the fellow had a way of making you see when he was in earnest and when it was safe to play with him.

For my part I ran back towards the inn eager to put my new skill into practice and win the knife which I knew my father kept ready for me, for he had shown it to me once to urge on my endeavour, and the vision of the clean blue steel was one which I loved to dwell upon.

CHAPTER IV

EBB-TIDE CAVE

IF I hadn't been so eager I should have paused long before I did to reflect that I should be most unlikely to find my father at the inn if Dirk and his fellows were in the neighbourhood. For, as I have told you, my father always vanished on these occasions. As it was, the thought came to me like the sudden arrest of a lasso, drawing me up short almost with a wrench. I stopped, and with the consideration that possibly my father didn't know of their presence, as Dirk's apparition had been a complete surprise to me, I trotted on again a few yards. But I soon came to another halt, this time because it seemed to me somewhat ill-judged to rush home and demand an immediate combat. The unusualness of the thing would make my father suspect some trick, and might put him on his guard. So I turned about, deciding to possess my soul in patience till the evening, when our battle would take place as usual, and then I would have the chance of displaying my newly learnt skill, and perhaps win the wished-for reward.

Now I think at this time I had three ambitions. The winning of the knife was one, perhaps the chief one. Next to that I wanted to find some quite new hiding-place where even my father wouldn't be able to find me. That he had hiding-places out of my knowledge I was only too sadly aware, but so far, as well as I knew the coast and the countryside, I hadn't succeeded in baffling his pursuit. My third great ambition was

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to find some underground communication between the shore and the woodland. I assumed that such a communication existed, and I explored all the caves and inlets for miles along the coast, but so far without success. There were long caverns eating far into the cliffs, some slippery with seaweed, some above the line of the high tides where the going was fairly easy; but none gave me the passage I was seeking.

There were several caves that I particularly suspected of concealing the desired secret. There was one which I named the Dragon's Mouth; for, following my father's lead, I gave my own names to all the landmarks of the place, not being satisfied as a rule with the rather unimaginative names which custom had christened them with. This cave I named the Dragon's

Mouth because blocking the opening was one huge rock like the tongue of some colossal monster thrust out through its jaws. I believed that if only the creature would draw in its tongue I should find the passage of my desires. Then there was Ebb-Tide Cave opening into Ebb-Tide Pool. I believe this name was of my father's giving. At high tide the pool, which was well hidden with a wall of rock, and invisible from the top of the cliff, which dropped steeply to a level platform and swelled out into a huge overbrowning arch of granite, was open to the sea through a twisting channel where a fair-sized boat might pass, I thought; and many were the dreams I fancied to myself of the coming and going of secret ships. But at low water the channel was closed, and so in stormy weather Ebb-Tide Pool was an ideal bathing-place. At high tide the cave was also in deep water, but dry, or nearly so, at low tide. But the baffling puzzle of the cave was that it stopped abruptly after some twenty yards, blankly walled with two great flattish rocks which looked for all the world like the two

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halves of a huge gate. And many a day I spent searching for the secret of their opening, but never with any hint of success.

There were other inlets too that I tested and examined. Particularly the few short tunnels that gave on to a sandy bay to the east of Ebb-Tide Pool. It was here that the fishermen launched their smacks, and a hut or two clung crazily to nooks in the sloping cliffs. At the farther horn of the bay was a dilapidated jetty, built originally of stone, but roughly repaired where the seas had breached it with makeshift piles and planking, themselves unsteady and decayed. It was only seldom that the fishermen used it; but I delighted in picturing to myself wild scenes of its desperate history when the smugglers were still a power on that coast. However, I discovered nothing in the bay. I searched east and west; and though at times I thought I had come upon a further clue, yet it never led to anything. And again and again I returned to the Dragon's Mouth and Ebb-Tide Cave, which seemed to me the most dumbly obstinate in refusing to yield their secrets.

This day, having nothing better to do, I set off for Ebb-Tide Pool for a clamber and a bathe till it should be time to return to the inn. I didn't go by the directest route, for, true to my father's training, I made a business of my play just as he made a game of all my education. Indeed work and play were one thing to me. For if we decided to climb Dead-Man's Drop or cross the Suck-Foot Marshes the expedition was always undertaken with

some imaginary purpose in view. There was a message to be delivered, or a sentry to be surprised; and usually we were ranged against each other, one being set to hinder the other, and the fun of the game wasn't merely in the climbing, or whatever it might be, but in evading the hidden enemy. So when left to myself I always devised some fanciful story to give a colour to my play. The result was that

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I scarcely ever made a direct journey, but always skirted this and rounded that to make believe I was outwitting my foes.

On this day I didn't wander very far from the path, but my route was somewhat roundabout. And on a sudden I came to an abrupt halt, listening intently; for once already I had been taken unawares, and I wasn't intending to be caught again. I had heard a crackling in the woods. I was distinctly alarmed to see Dirk Stormaway stepping at right angles across my path, for I knew if he should see me he would believe I had been tracking him. Accordingly I squeezed up against a tree and waited for him to go by. He passed behind a thick clump of thorn, but didn't reappear. I listened for his step, and watched for him; but there was no sign of him anywhere. I was just going to move on, when again there was the sound of steps, and once more I grew on to my protecting tree. I was amazed to see my father following stealthily on the trail of Dirk. And he too vanished.

Then it occurred to me that it was round here that my father always managed to baffle my search whenever he hid from me. I had tracked his lair to within a hundred yards or so, but never to its exact goal. However, I thought this was no time for further investigation. The air was tense with alarm for me, and I felt a pang of doubt on my father's account. If Dirk should catch him following ... I thought he would either break his back like a stick, or put that famous knife trick of his into practice. But I was used to strangeness and mystery, and the idea of hunting and being hunted was familiar to me from as far back as I could remember; so I easily shook off the impression of alarm that had crept over me, and skirting away from the point of danger I was soon stripping for a dive in the pool.

The afternoon was beautiful, with a blazing sun, and I was

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in and out of the water, practising all my strokes and tricks, for some hours, for evening was drawing on before I dried myself for the last time by

jumping up and down in the sun, and pulled on my clothes. The tide had been coming in, and was now almost full. With one last look at the tempting depths, wondering whether I should strip again for a final plunge, I turned and set off up the cliff. Some day, I vowed, I would negotiate that huge frowning brow of rock that overhung the pool, for at present if I wanted to reach the level platform above it—an ideal spot for a boy to sprawl on and send his dreams out over the sea—I had to scramble down from the top of the cliff; and in climbing up from below I had to be content with a longer trail to the left.

I had taken only a few steps when I heard a gruff voice beneath me chanting an old sea-song, and with instinctive caution I ducked behind a boulder as I saw the nose of a boat pushing out from Ebb-Tide Cave. I rubbed my eyes twice to clear my sight, when I saw that in the boat was none other than Dirk himself. But there was no mistaking him. And he knew his way too, for he steered straight for the outlet of the pool, and I watched him pass easily through the choppy waves, guiding himself with his oars, and out through the twisting channel, where rounding a headland of rock he disappeared. I now knew that my suspicion of those closed gates in the cave was justly founded, yet until this moment I didn't realize how little I had credited my own childish theories, for the revelation came to me not as a thing long expected, but with a shock of surprise.

My thought now was to descend again and investigate, but I think I must have been getting frightened and unnerved by the adventures of the day, for somehow the idea of returning to the cave and finding the gates closed against me, though

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knowing full well that Dirk had just passed through them, jarred unpleasantly on my imagination. And suppose they were not closed? Suppose they were open? I should be confronted by the dead blackness of the unknown beyond. I shuddered, and turned away, wondering at my ebbing courage, for it wasn't usual for me to turn heart-sick at the prospect of adventure. But I was still a child, and I was probably tired, and had certainly had my fill of surprises for one day.

Not till I was nearly at the top of the cliff did I remember my father, who must have been following Dirk. Perhaps if I had descended again I should have met him, and learnt the secret from him. Again I hung irresolute, but I reasoned that by now he would no longer be there. Also I was feeling

weary, and told myself that I must be fresh for the combat in the evening if I were to bring off my little manœuvre successfully and win the knife.

My father was already in, doctoring up his scarred hand, when I arrived. As usual he greeted me with, "Found anything to-day, Tommy?" I could have answered volumes to that question, but reserve was part of my training, and I wanted to use my new knowledge before I divulged it; so I only answered, "Had a lovely day," and reaching up put my arms around his neck and kissed him. But in his eyes as I searched them I saw no trace of excitement to show that he had been spending his time otherwise than usual.

Supper was brought to us, and after supper we cleared the room for battle. But I didn't win the knife. To tell the truth I felt rather stupid and asleep, and for the life of me couldn't bring myself to try Dirk's trick. I realized too that it might be easy enough in practice, but in a real fight it would be another matter. A slip would put you at the complete

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mercy of your antagonist. It was a reserve manœuvre to be kept as a last resort when the choice lay between a desperate risk and a certain defeat.

My father saw that I was tired, and soon cried enough; and then settling down in the waning twilight he put the final touches to his hand, and commencing to yarn bore me away with him on the magical stream of his story over wonderful seas.

The hour of the evening story was always a golden time for me. For my father didn't merely stuff me with thrill. Looking back I can realize now how artistic in conception and narration were those extraordinary yarns of his gleaned from every imaginable type of old sea-dog with whom he had rubbed shoulders, and vivified with all the charm of his abundant imagination. Sometimes he would set me to tell the story, but in his presence I was tongue-tied and stumbling in my speech; but I know that I learnt from him, and not from any pedagogue, whatever understanding and appreciation I have of the splendour of language.

And so with the last of the light to bed; while my father drew a heavy screen around his little reading-table, and lighting his lamp applied himself to the mystery, whatever it might be, which engaged him night by night. All I ever heard was the scratching of his quill, or more usually the turning of pages.

He was still behind the screen when I awoke with the question on my lips, “Are you a poet, daddy?”

I think he was surprised, for he exclaimed quickly, “A poet, Tommy?” and I heard a faint sigh. Then he laughed and said, “You’ve been dreaming, Tommy. Better go to sleep again.”

CHAPTER V

THE CLOSED GATE

MY father always tried to meet a surprise with calm acceptance as though it was a thing which he had been anticipating. This was part of his “technique of philosophy”, as he termed it, though the phrase was sufficiently incomprehensible to me as a boy. So when, the next morning, I tracked him right into his hiding-place, pushing under the bushes and finding the hole which led down into the secret passage, he didn’t exclaim his astonishment, but hearing me stumbling my way through the unexplored blackness he opened the shutter of the dark lantern he was carrying, and said in a matter-of-fact voice, “Come along, Tommy; I’ll show you.”

It was I who was taken aback, for he had been hidden from me and the sudden light surprised me. I uttered a feeble “Oh!” and took his hand.

The passage was wide enough for two, and high enough for a short man like my father to walk upright in. The lantern lit up at intervals the stays and beams which supported the tunnel, showing it to be a man-made affair. Presently we came to a flight of roughly levelled steps built up with stakes into the earth, and at the end there was a steep drop into darkness, with a rope ladder disappearing into the gulf. My father began to descend, and I followed. It was a longish shaft, and I was glad to reach the bottom. I knew at once that we were in a different sort of place now, for the sound of our feet echoed resonantly, and the walls were running with moisture, and there were no supports along the sides.

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As we proceeded, the tunnel gradually widened, twisting its way downward at a gentle slope, and after a while the floor became slippery with sea-weed, showing that the tide flowed in at full. In fact, before we had reached the end of the journey we were wading in water up to our knees, for it was still fairly early, about nine or ten, and the tide was only at half ebb. And then my father set his lantern in a niche high up in the wall, and said, “Well, what do you make of it, Tommy?”

I looked about me in the dim light, and before me stood a flat wall of rock, split in two, which I recognized at once as the back of the gateway

that opened into Ebb-Tide Cave, though whether I should have recognized it so quickly if it hadn't been for my observations of the day before I don't know. I said with something of my father's nonchalance, "This opens into Ebb-Tide Pool."

Even my father couldn't quite screen his surprise, for he wasn't to know how I had arrived at my knowledge.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "you're very cute, Tommy."

"But look!" I said, and pointed to the twin doors of rock.

"But how do you know it opens?" he asked.

"I know," I said.

"But how?"

"It must do," I said doggedly; for I couldn't tell him how I knew.

"Yes, it does," he said at length, "but I haven't found out how it's done."

We didn't find out that morning either, though we probed every nook and cranny, questing for the secret bolt or spring or whatever it might be which would set that great gate swinging. My father had been over the whole ground before, and I found nothing new to solve the mystery. I thought I

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had made a discovery when, scrambling up to the niche where my father had set the lantern, I found I could thrust my arm deep into a cranny full of rotting refuse. I cleared it away, but couldn't reach to the end of the little crevice. I pointed it out to my father; but he had explored it before without result. We came away at last, and emerging into the bracken blinked at the blinding daylight.

"That's that," said my father, and warned me not to prowl there too often. But I knew what I meant to do.

For the rest of the day I reserved my strength, knowing I had been too tired the evening before to do myself justice with the knife; so I lay out on the cliff and bathed in the glorious sun that still beat splendidly from the blue, and before returning I tumbled into the sea for a single plunge, and reached the inn with a magnificent appetite and feeling fit for the evening's encounter.

To describe the combat in all its details would take too much space, for it was long and eventful. I tried every artifice my father had taught me, hoping to make my drive without betraying my secret, but he held me in play too surely, and though I managed to parry his attacks I scored no hits

myself. As we drew apart for a rest, both panting from the exertion, he asked, "Had enough, Tommy?" And I answered carelessly, "No, I'm fit for another turn," and we closed again.

I ran in quickly this time, intending to put the trick into immediate play. As I expected, he shot out his left hand and caught my wrist, and I saw the word "Rash !" forming on his lips, but before it was uttered I slipped the knife into my left hand, and with a sideways jab crushed the paper weapon against his breast, feeling my hand go thump against his ribs as though I had struck him.

"Well!" he exclaimed, and dropped his own weapon to the

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floor. "Well!" He sat down. "I *have* seen it done, Tommy; but where did you learn it?"

I evaded the answer by dancing about him and exclaiming, "The knife, the knife, I've won the knife!"

"And you shall have it," he said.

And so at last the shining prize lay in my hand, and with fond fingers I felt along its delicious edge. When should I need to use it in earnest, I wondered.

I turned a radiant face to my father, and throwing an arm round him I kissed him vigorously, and drawing away said, "If I ever meet Shadow-of-Fear, or the old witch, Bite-in-the Dark. . I didn't need to finish the sentence, but slipping the knife from my upraised right hand into my left I practised the feint in mid air. My father smiled and said, "Don't be satisfied yet, Tommy. You're not a man till you can use a pistol too."

In honour of the occasion he told me a wonderful tale that night; and I sat at his feet long after the sun had gone down, and the window had become a black square, and the strange voices of the night were ominous of dark and secret things, listening to my father as he told a story of desperate smuggling and battles and arrests and rescues. The story, I remember, was particularly vivid, because it was set locally, and all the caves and creeks I knew and the old tumble-down jetty became alive with savage men; and especially I remember how the gate at Ebb-Tide Cave gave up its secret, swinging away from the wall, and leaving revealed a passage into the cliff. And one cruel incident dwelt in my memory for many a day because of my father's vivid description. It was an old smuggler's vengeance on a traitor,

the wretched victim being torn asunder between earth and sea, with a rope around him from a cave roof, and a heavy log tied to his feet and floating

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on the water, weighing him down to a lingering death as the tide slowly ebbed.

When at last I crept into bed it was a real comfort to me to slip the knife under my pillow, for the tale had been unusually stirring, and my mind was in a strange confusion. More than once I awoke startled, and felt swiftly under the pillow for the reassuring touch of my newly-won friend; for it may have been the effect of my father's story, or it may have been an uneasy premonition of coming things, but I seemed to hear a sort of stifled shuffling through the house, and knockings and smothered voices; and the trees outside shook unsettled branches, and a swaying bough kept brushing furtively across the pane.

Once I awoke with a greater start than ever, and sat bolt upright listening intently, every nerve strained and alert. It was unmistakable; there was something creeping in the room. For a moment I thought a hand touched my neck, but it was only my hair stiffening. I took control of myself, though my heart thumped deafeningly, and quietly reached a hand out for my father. He wasn't there. At this I think I broke down, and cried terribly, "Dad, dad, where are you?"

"Heigh, Tommy, what?" he answered quickly, and was at my side.

"Oh, daddy," I said, trying to hold back my tears, "I was frightened."

"Why, you have your knife," he tried to pacify me.

"But where were you?" I asked.

"Why," he answered easily, "I must have fallen asleep in my chair."

It wasn't till morning that I remembered I had already felt him in bed beside me. Waking with that thought in the grey dawn I told myself he had been listening through the floor.

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CHAPTER VI

THE KING'S MAN

I SPRANG out of bed feeling very much ashamed of myself for my stupid terror of the night. Daylight makes our fears seem so foolish that we wonder how we could ever have been afraid. My head was still a little dizzy and uncertain, so I scrambled into my clothes and ran downstairs and into the yard for a cooling drench under the pump. I was longer than usual, for as a rule I wasn't too attentive to this part of my toilet; but this morning there was a clinging vapoury hotness about my brow which wouldn't be readily washed away. When at length, refreshed, and doubtless with rosy cheeks and dishevelled hair, I broke back into the kitchen, I stopped short in sudden consternation to find it full of men. I at once recognized them as Dirk's fellows, but a quick glance round showed me that Dirk himself wasn't there. Now I had always thought of these rough strangers as pirates, not in the least doing them disparagement in my thoughts on that account, rather in my imagination framing them romantically in adventures on far seas; but something, I suppose, of last night's story was still beating in my head, and forgetting utterly my father's warning to steer clear of these men, I was seized by a stupid madness, and unwittingly blurted out, "The smugglers!"

I was dumbfounded as soon as the words were out of my mouth, for there was a sudden stillness in the room. Talk

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stopped, cannikins were arrested half-way to the lips and every eye was ferociously bent on me in a sort of savage questioning.

Then one fierce fellow strode up to me, and taking me by the shoulders said, "Do'st mind repeating that theer?"

But I had no word to say, and only looked up at him blankly, and shook my head.

He dug his fingers into my flesh and spoke more harshly, "Come now, who's been telling ee they tales?"

I had it in my head to explain how I had merely fitted the fellows into my father's stories, and I began fatally as though in answer to his question, "My father ..."

But he broke in with, "Thy father, eh?"

"No, no, no," I cried in dismay, but a general burst of oaths drowned my protest. A discussion was raging fiercely, but I could make little of its drift; I only caught such expressions as "I told thee now," and some one answering, "That's ee; that's the cove." More ominously sounded the grating whisper of one harsh voice, "The King's Man, freeze un!" and again I heard the same voice muttering, "Spy!"

How all this applied to my father I couldn't guess, but I had sense enough to realize that he was in danger, and my part was to warn him. A jerk away from my captor only set me in firmer imprisonment, with a kick on my shin to put me on my best behaviour. I began to be frightened.

Soon they had me in the midst of them, and their menacing bloodshot eyes terrified me more than the fists they held to my face. I was cowed by their brutality, and gave no thought even to the precious knife in my belt. I must have whimpered, for some one caught me a buffet across the face and said, "Here, stop they waterworks, and speak to what th'art bid." And then came a question to which probably only my blubbering saved me from betraying the true answer. For a voice was

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saying in a husky attempt at a whisper, "Thy father, him be the cove with the burn accrosst his hand, eh?"

The question startled me, and I heaved out a further burst of tears to cover my confusion.

"Here, hearken," I was bidden again in the same grating tones, "an' Gawd help ee if thee don't speak up true. Be thy father the cove with the burn accrosst his hand?"

"Left hand," somebody added.

I raised my face, biting at my lips to check my tears, and shook my head as foolishly as I could to express my utter failure to comprehend. In my mind, bewildered as I was, I was busily wondering how to warn my father. I felt thankful when I remembered it was only a few days ago that he had last treated his scar, and it would still be invisible to these men even if they caught him and examined him. I had no thought to spare for the mystery which had set them on his track by this tell-tale sign. So when the question was repeated to me, instead of shaking my head I stamped my foot in childish petulance, and shouted so that my father if he were listening above us might hear, "Burn? Haven't I said there's no burn? Fools!"

I was caught a sounding cuff for my pains and sent reeling, and as a hand gripped me I cowered, expecting the blow to be repeated; but my heart gave a strange jump of relief as I heard Dirk's voice above me. He had entered the kitchen and was cursing volubly. When his oaths were exhausted he thundered, "What the blazes 're you doing with the kid, anyway?"

Explanations broke out confusedly, but he cut them short with, "Stow yer gab, the lot o' you," and when the room was silent he turned to the ruffian who had first seized me and demanded, "Speak up, Davie; what's it about?"

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Davie explained, and Dirk glowered at me darkly and said, "So that's it, eh? Told you we were smugglers, eh?"

"No," I cried, "no. Yarns; that's all. I told you ..."

But his great hand came slapping over my mouth, and I felt my shoulder severely wrenched. I had nearly betrayed our earlier meeting.

"Ah," Dirk took me up sarcastically, "he tells yarns, does he? One of these poetical chaps, I reckon. Heard of poetical license, come to think of it. Seems like a case of it. Wull," he ended unexpectedly, "we are smugglers. Now how d'you like it?"

"Really?" I cried with such genuine admiration that there was a general guffaw, and all at once the strained atmosphere was wonderfully relieved.

"Yus, really," said Dirk. "Have a good look at us. Handsome lot, aren't we? An' if you ever write one o' them yarns like what your dad does, wull, put us all in, an' we'll take it kindly of you; and hang us all at the end for warnings like, same as they done to Jem an' Roger last year. Poor devils!"

The grins changed to oaths at the mention of Jem and Roger, and Dirk's face became hard. But just then my father was heard running down the stairs singing gaily to himself, and every form froze in rigid expectation. He was singing a song I delighted in, but I was appalled to hear it now:

"Dance to your daddy,
My little laddy,
Dance to your daddy,
My little man...."

He had got so far when he swung open the door, and stopped short with well-feigned surprise to see the kitchen crowded with silent men, all with eyes fixed intently upon him. His

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hands were in his pockets, and I knew how those eyes were waiting for them to be withdrawn.

“Company! Splendid!” cried my father, and called for the mugs to be filled; and then catching sight of me still struggling against my tears, “Why, what’s this, Tommy?” he said, and laid his hands upon my shoulders, holding me out at arm’s length.

“Nothing, daddy, nothing,” I answered, smiling back as well as I might.

But I knew that both his thought and mine was that his hands were free to the view of all. For a half moment the silence seemed to freeze in the air; then there was a low muttering, and voices broke out again.

They had looked their fill, and had seen nothing.

My father gave me a little push to hint to me my course, and I slipped from the room, while the business of drinking was resumed; and before I left the inn I heard bursts of laughter, and my father’s voice raised above the rest. I understood well enough that he had made all easy there, and was regaling the company with his racy chaff.

I made for Ebb-Tide Pool, intending to hide before the smugglers should be back there. I meant to learn the secret of the gate this day.

It was still early morning, and the tide was coming in. There might just be keel-way for a boat, I thought, to steer in through the channel. If I were quick I might be in time to see a boat enter or row away; so I made no circuits in my route this day but took the shortest path I knew. But I did throw one sop to make-believe, carrying my knife in my mouth. And the result was, clambering down the cliff with too little regard to safe footing I slipped on a rock just above the pool, and being

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child enough to exclaim at the slight twist it gave to my ankle, the knife fell from my mouth, and I watched it strike on a ledge and splash into the water.

I knew it was deep where the knife had fallen, and quickly slipping off my clothes I dived in to recover it. I thought it would be an easy matter, but

three times I rose unsuccessfully to the surface. I crawled out to regain my breath, and noticed that the current had carried me away from the spot close in to the very edge of the cliff. I reasoned that that explained my failure, and when my breath was sufficiently restored I plunged in again, but this time farther out to allow for drift. Even so I had to grope along the bottom of the pool till my breath was nearly exhausted before my hand touched the knife, buried in the sand almost up to the hilt. I tugged it free, and made for the surface, but the water grew strangely dark around me, and my head came crack against a rock. I struggled desperately, for my lungs were bursting, but I seemed to be imprisoned beneath an immovable roof. I tried to reason out my position, how I had come there, and which was the right way to turn. I remembered how the current had carried me towards the cliff, and in a dim, distracted sort of way knew quite well that all I had to do was to push out and up. But though I knew quite well what to do, an unreasonable panic had control of my limbs, and I kicked and beat frenziedly against my prison, while a voice seemed to be saying to me from far away, "Keep cool, Tommy; always keep cool." I was in an agony, knowing myself in the grip of a stupid terror, when deliverance lay in calmness; but I couldn't shake off the terror, and my temples were hammering and my ears throbbing. And suddenly there seemed to be only water about me again, and lashing out with arms and legs I found myself at the surface gulping in the air with great choking sobs.

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Mechanically I trod water till I could regain my breath, and only gradually it dawned upon me that it was strange that all about me should be pitch dark. I rubbed the water out of my eyes, I tried to remember whether I had been bathing at night-time, for I was still confused. Then growing a little clearer in mind I told myself it was the blood that had rushed to my head, and I should soon be able to see again. But still everything was dark around me, and the realization that it actually was so came like a shock. Where was I?

As I grew calmer a certain interest mingled with my fear; I peered around, and dimly became aware of a faint green glow along the water. I began to swim about to find into what strange place I had stumbled, but the water seemed half choked with drift and refuse, and going wasn't easy. Weeds clung about my legs, sucking hatefully to my flesh, creeping like fingers furtively feeling along my naked body. The water seemed to be

alive with slimy things reaching their tendrils hungrily out of the dark. If I moved slowly they slid about my throat, and if I splashed my way through they gripped viciously about my arms and feet. And all the while the green glow intensified along the water, and the floating things showed up vaguely luminous through the dark. It was with a gush of relief that at last I felt the bottom, and with a spasm of fear scrambled out of the infested pool, shuddering at the thought of what horrors lay concealed there; for my mind was full of stories I had heard of the devil-fish and other slow and evil monsters of the caves.

For a while I could do nothing but hug myself into as small a space as possible, trembling and chattering with fright, my eyes intent upon the green and glowing water, expecting momentarily some clutching tentacle to rise and seize me.

How long I should have remained so I don't know, for I

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was completely unstrung and had no power to move a finger to help myself; and the startled scurrying of creatures about my back and feet added to my horror. But my fear was lifted from me by a sound that might have added to it: I heard voices. And voices in that dark underworld, which seemed to have shut me right away from the light and air, were like a reassurance that I wasn't hopelessly entombed. I began to listen, but could only make out a low, indistinguishable droning which I couldn't locate. But the effort to locate it nerved me again, and I took control of myself and began to grope through the darkness towards the sound. I slipped often enough, but the voices became louder; and presently I noticed a wavering patch of yellow light against the green iridescence of the cavern. I made towards it, and I think it wasn't till this moment that I became aware by a cramp in my hand that all the while I had been tenaciously clinging to my knife. I was cheered to think that in the struggle under water and the scramble in the cave I hadn't dropped it.

Soon the light was over my head and after a trial or two I succeeded in climbing to a secure perch where I could examine it. But putting up my face I was dazzled by the full glare of a lantern in my eyes, which had by now grown so used to the darkness that the phosphorescent glow of the rotting drift about me was bright enough to show me the rough outline of the rocks.

I hastily withdrew my face from the light of the lantern, which was shining through a crevice in the wall of the cave; and then like a blurred picture focusing to clearness everything took shape and coherence in my mind, and I knew exactly where I was.

The lantern was standing where my father had placed it the day before when he had taken me down the secret passage and

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together we had examined the great closed doors. The crevice was the one through which I had thrust my hand, clearing it of its rubbish, so that now the lantern could shine right through. But now I was on the other side. Somehow I had dived under the submarine mouth of this cavern, never suspecting its existence. Quickly the thought flashed through my head that now I had found the hiding-place I wanted; but the thought melted as quickly as it came, for I had other matter on hand. For through the cranny I could hear the voices speaking distinctly enough to make out what they were saying, though of course I couldn't see anything as the lantern glared full into my face if I attempted to look into the passage beyond.

And what I heard soon began to have an interest for me.

There were two men, it seemed, and I assumed they were in their boat, probably on guard, for the tide was rising to the full now, and the cave must have been deep in water. I couldn't catch all they were saying; but when I heard the words, "Cut accrosst his hand," I strained my ears to the uttermost.

"Yus," was the reply, "an' a burn too, warn't it?"

"Aye; an' a brat with 'un, they do say."

"Wull, I s'pose they'll nab 'un all right."

"Hope so. Must have been ee what let Jem an' Roger into the trap last year."

"Ah! Wull, Dirk'll see to 'un."

"If he bean't too cute."

"He'll need be if ee can hide they tracks."

There was a short pause, and the last speaker began again:

"But how did Dirk get wind of it?"

"Wind of what?"

"Why, the burn, and the brat, an' that."

"Dunno quite. Some one let on, I spose. Some one what

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was nabbed, I dessay, an' found 'un out when it was too late. Got word through, I expect. Dirk's sharp."

What happened next it was impossible for me to know at the time. The voices had stopped, and I was worrying the problem how my father could have become mixed up in all this business. It was clear to me that he was suspected of being a King's Man and spying on the smugglers to betray them. I don't believe I gave a thought to whether he were guilty of the charge or no; the thing that puzzled me was how the burn and the scar and even my presence came into the affair, for these seemed part of another episode altogether. But at any rate my meditations were cut short by a tremendous uproar from the smugglers' cave. There were cries and curses and commands, and the sound of scuffling and splashing, and the lantern was dashed from its place, and through the crevice I saw the light of day. I guessed the gates had been opened. And then there was tumult inconceivable, the volleying of pistols, screams and curses, all echoing in a resounding roar up the rocky corridor. And, after a little, peace.

I was dazed and stupefied. I strained my eyes to see through the cranny, but could distinguish nothing to tell me what had happened. And then again from the distance, very far away as it seemed to me buried there, came the faint echo of a further fight. But beyond the fact that there had been a fight of some kind I could guess nothing.

I waited a long time listening, but all was still again, and the stillness began to press upon me like the dread of some unknown danger. I remembered my strange position, and something of my first fear returned upon me. I was alone, cut off as it seemed in the quietness of the cave from the world I knew. It was dark about me with only a greenish glow to show me the shadowy forms of things. And everything I touched was damp

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and slippery, and the water smooth and secret and laid over with a luminous green slime. And the thought came to me with a sickening shudder that to escape I must dive again into that putrid pool, through the clinging weeds and the thousand horrible things which I felt were lurking for me there. And then I knew I was cold, and shivered.

I couldn't face it. I stumbled along the slippery edge of the water, searching desperately for some other outlet, but I only seemed to be plunging into deeper darkness, and wherever I trod the crabs scurried away beneath my feet. Then looking back I could no longer see the one gleam of

light that bound me to the outside world. At that I was thoroughly terrified, and turning on my tracks I hurried, slipping back along the water's edge, till once more I saw the faint gleam above me, and felt cheered.

So I sat down for a minute or two to get a grip of my courage, and told myself over and over that I was a coward. The lesson of the night before came into my mind, and I knew that it was merely a baseless fear of the dark that possessed me; but the knowledge didn't strengthen me. I sat shaking, my teeth chattering in my head. To dive into that greenness seemed beyond my power; I saw myself struggling in the dark, choked beneath the water, entombed. And all at once, I don't know why, I rose and plunged, and in my eyes the water grew radiant again, and I was puffing safely in Ebb-Tide Pool.

I swam for the shore, and warmed myself in the sun, blinking at the unaccustomed light, and telling myself, as I had done in the morning, that I was a fool to be afraid of nothing. And then I realized that the only way to prove my courage and recover my lost self-esteem was to dive back to the cave and out again till I knew the way by heart and had familiarized it from all terrors. But the thought of returning there wasn't

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pleasant, and it was only a sudden resolution like the one that had brought me safely to the light again that sent me diving back into the darkness. Yet once there something of my fear revived, and hardly waiting to draw breath I was under and out again.

I told myself that was enough, and so climbed up to my clothes intending to dress and investigate the meaning of the recent battle.

I had just slipped my shirt over my head, when there was a shout above me, and stones and earth came tumbling down the cliff. Looking up I saw three men struggling, and one of them breaking free tottered and came sprawling over the edge. The other two followed with more caution. They were in red uniform, and the man they were chasing was Dirk.

He recovered his footing and came bounding down towards me. I was quick enough to take in the situation. The smugglers had been surprised by the runners, and here was Dirk making his last dash for freedom. So swift a thing is thought that I had time to remember the talk in the cave about the King's Man. Had some one betrayed them? Had my father ...

"Dirk!" I cried to him, though taking care to screen myself from the runners who were still far above. "Dirk, come."

“Off, kid,” he shouted.

“I’ll show you,” I said.

But I could never have stopped him if he hadn’t slipped and fallen. He lay grasping his ankle and rocking himself in an agony.

“I’m done,” he moaned, “done.”

“There’s a cave,” I said.

“I know, kid,” he growled, “and they know.”

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“You don’t know,” I insisted, “and they don’t know. I was there all the time.”

The runners, sure of their prize, were taking their time in the descent, not being used to such scrambling, and unwilling, I dare say, to soil their grand uniforms.

“Dirk,” I pressed, “see here. It’s under the water. You dive and come up. It’s all dark.”

But he only grinned bitterly at me, still holding his ankle.

“Then see,” I cried in desperation, and running dived into the pool, and rising in the cave waited a full two minutes before returning.

I climbed back to Dirk and said, “See, am I puffed? I tell you ...”

But now he had grasped my meaning.

“Come,” he said excitedly, “show me.”

I pointed to the spot, and limping to the edge he dived. He didn’t reappear. And hiding my clothes, for I didn’t want the runners to have them, I plunged after Dirk, and rose almost beside him in the weedy water.

“This way,” I said, and swam for the side; and soon we were both clinging there, blowing vigorously.

Between gasps he told me of his adventures, and I heard how the smugglers had been surprised. Their sentry had been seized and gagged, and so they hadn’t been warned of the King’s frigate which had appeared off the coast. Some one had betrayed them.

“Not my dad,” I said.

“No, not him, laddie,” said Dirk. “He gave us the first warning, but it was too late.”

“Where is he?” I asked.

“Oh, he’s vanished.”

“Yes,” I said, trusting my father’s resources at evasion.

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It was some while later when we heard voices in the cave, and I showed Dirk the cranny where he might peep through. Suddenly he uttered a great oath.

“What?” I whispered.

“Shhh!”

Then came a tremendous echoing crash, and the sound of cheering.

When all was quiet again he told me. He had seen the King’s Man, the fellow who had betrayed them. “An’ it was right what I was told,” he said. “He had a burn across his hand, sonny. But it wasn’t your dad,” he added as I gave a little cry. “I saw his face, an’ he’s showed them the gates an’ how they worked, blast him!”

“How do they work?” I asked.

“They’ll never work no more,” was all he answered.

It was some days before the coast was clear. And all the while I carried food surreptitiously to Dirk, stuffing it into the cranny from Ebb-Tide Cave. My father had quite established himself with the runners when I first arrived back at the inn. I told him my secret, and he patted me affectionately on the head.

“Always make friends, Tommy,” he said.

But he only ventured once down to Ebb-Tide Cave, and that was with a party of runners who went to superintend the destruction of the old haunt. I went too, and saw the great gates wide. The two rocks had been perfectly balanced against each other, and as one sank down into the earth it drew the other up into the roof by a stout steel cable. It was while I was with Dirk that the runners had hacked the cable through, and the huge half of rock that should have been poised above had crashed down, and now lay along the passage. But the

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tunnel which my father had expected to find, opening into the side of the cave wall, wasn’t there. And somehow I think he had lost interest in the place, for he questioned me little enough of the cave I had discovered; and he seemed uneasy too, barring our door strongly at night, and waking at the least scratch.

When the runners at length gave up the search, Dirk came from his hiding-place. In the distance the frigate was fading from sight. I shall never forget that gaunt, dripping figure, slowly dragging himself up the cliff

because of the pain at his damaged foot, his clothes clinging to his limbs and oozing with green weed, his long hair with the pig-tail all undone drooping flat down his neck and over his sunken cheeks. The picture still haunts me in my dreams; and I see him as he climbed to a ledge of rock, and slowly turned his face towards the sea, his eyes, still heavy from the long darkness, peering with evil hate at the vanishing ship that was carrying away his mates to their doom. His teeth gnashed with impotent rage, and he tottered to his feet and shook one terrible fist at the frigate, and cried a bitter curse on the spy who had betrayed his comrades. Then laughing brokenly he turned to me, and clambered on up the cliff, saying, "But I saw him, kiddy; I know him; an' I'll follow him to the end of the world, but I'll have his heart's blood."

I was silent, and the giant continued his painful ascent. And breaking from a snarling mutter he said to me, stopping on his path, "See here, kiddy, you don't know what hate means, I dessay. But it means just this: I've made my pile; I can rest an' be comfortable, an' have my seat by the fire an' the drink at my hand; but I'll give every piece I've gathered to hunt that devil to earth. I'll get him. I'll get him."

At the top of the cliff he hurled forth his last threat, as the

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white square sails faded into the misty air, then slowly stumbled back with me to the inn. And as I walked at his side I thought I began to understand why one man should hunt another over the world. I knew something of the life of the hunted; now for the first time I saw the hunter giving cry. And my father ... But I couldn't imagine my father as a spy and a betrayer. And then the old story of the Mad Captain came back to me. But neither could I see my father as one who had left his men to perish all alone. What was the secret of his flight?

At the inn my father was ready for the road again.

"Come Tommy," he said, "we must tramp."

I held out my hand to Dirk. "Good-bye," I said.

He took my little hand in both his. "Good-bye, kiddy," he said kindly enough. "You're a good brat. You've saved my life; an' maybe I'll do the same for you one day."

He nodded curtly to my father, and rolled into the inn.

But we two plunged into the woodland and travelled far that night, and with the morning struck the highway, and begging a lift of a carter bound

for market were soon jolting along the road, fast asleep.

CHAPTER VII

THE MANUSCRIPT

WE must have been wandering for a week or more, bearing northwards all the while, before we halted for a few days at a village inn: the *Snow Man* I believe it was called. It seemed to me as though our life of hardships had begun afresh, for as far as possible we kept to woods and byways where there was shelter and hiding. And yet it was on this journey that my father gave me my first lessons with the pistol; and I think he found me an eager pupil. As with the knife, he promised me a pistol of my own when I became expert enough to merit one, and with this bait to lure on my endeavour I practised sedulously with the weapon every morning, for our travelling was done mostly at night.

My father soon regained all his buoyancy and cheerfulness, and questioned me eagerly about my discovery of the cave. "What are we to call it?" he cut me short almost at the beginning of my narrative. I had my answer ready, for this matter of naming places had become almost a second nature with me; and I said, "Drift-Wood Cavern," and added, "and the passage you showed me is the Smugglers' Tunnel."

"Very well," he agreed. "And now tell me your story, Tommy."

I told him with as much coherence as his constant questionings would permit, for he was so eager to learn all about my find that he continually interrupted me with questions of his

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own, running on ahead of me as it were, and was rather disappointed when my recital came to an abrupt finish.

"But surely, Tommy," he said, "you found where it went?"

"I don't know any more," I declared.

"Why, it might lead anywhere," he insisted with fervour. "It might go for miles. It must be full of secrets, Tommy, and hidden treasures, and ... Why didn't you ..."

"Well, the runners ..." I began in my defence, meaning to say that the less time I spent there the better while the runners were still hunting for Dirk; but he cut in, saying:

“Ah, the runners; yes. If it hadn’t been for the runners, Tommy, I should have had the secret out of it by now.”

This surprised me, for as soon as the soldiers had gone my father had packed up his kit and vanished too. So I asked, “Why didn’t you stay then, daddy?”

He looked at me more sharply than usual, for it wasn’t my custom to question him like this; and at the moment his answer seemed a strange one, for after a pause he suddenly exclaimed, “By gad, Tommy, you’re quite a little man! Soon be calling me father.”

“No, daddy, no,” I protested, for somehow the colder title didn’t seem to suit our relationship. I put up my arms and kissed him to show I wasn’t beyond that yet, though I was growing rapidly in these days; and I think the sentimental little scene pleased him.

“Well, well!” he said affectionately, patting my cheek.

I was quiet, for he hadn’t answered my question. He seemed to be meditating something, and twice he was about to speak; but eyeing me askance he held his peace. And it wasn’t until we were installed at the *Snow Man* some days later that the answer came, and then in a strange manner.

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As at the *Dolphin* we shared an upstairs room, and I noticed ‘that my father’s uneasiness hadn’t lessened with our flight, though he was cheerful enough. Indeed I have scarcely ever known him otherwise than cheerful, though now I can realize something of the harrowing anxiety that must have been his almost daily portion. We hadn’t been alone in our room for half a minute before he began examining the locks and bolts of the door and window, sounding the walls, peering into cupboards and behind pictures, and feeling up the chimney. Later he tested the possibility of climbing down the wall outside the window, which was well hidden from the road. He managed it, but with great difficulty, and that seemed to set him more at ease. But chiefly I noticed how late he sat up at nights by his reading-lamp; and as there was no screen in the room I was able to see something of what he was doing, though he always sat with his back to me, shielding me from the light as well as he could. But I could see him turning pages, and tracing lines with his pencil, sometimes leaning back with the pencil between his teeth, thinking.

As a rule, however, I was tired enough not to be over curious, soon dropping off to sleep, and only occasionally waking to see him still at his

task, or to feel him creeping carefully into bed beside me so as not to wake me up.

But about the third night, if I remember rightly, I awoke to find him kneeling at my side, gazing so intently at me that it seemed as though his very gaze had awakened me. I opened my eyes full upon him and didn't move, and for his part he remained looking not so much at me as at something deep within me which he was dumbly questioning. Then his widened pupils contracted, and with a flitting smile as though he were awakening to reality he said, "You see, Tommy, it's like this. Who put the smugglers on my track, scenting

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round me as though I was harming them? And who was it betrayed those two last year? And why?" His voice had a strange ring in it which I hadn't heard before. "Why, Tommy why?" he added more excitedly, and seemed to be waiting for an answer.

Waking like that in the dead of night it all seemed very queer to me; for to see my father's eyes bent upon me so, and to hear his "Why, Tommy, why?" was somehow vaguely troubling. The clothes across my chest felt very heavy all at once, and my limbs seemed bound to the bed; for there was something that held me there and wouldn't let me move. A kind of spell was upon me, and I felt I wanted to scream. And then my father rose and began pacing the room, and the horrid charm snapped. I gave a great gulp, and realized I had been holding my breath all the while; and the numbness fell from my limbs, and they were mine once more to move as I would.

My father came to a halt and sat on the bed beside me. I was quite awake now and understood something of his drift. He began to speak again, but his tone was calmer:

"One way of ridding yourself of an enemy, Tommy, is to set another on his track. When you can't fight your own battles, perhaps if you are clever enough, you may get another to fight them for you. Now suppose ..."

"Oh, daddy, I see, I see," I cried, for I loved to display my sagacity before my father.

"Well," he smiled at me.

"Why," I went on breathlessly, "it's Shadow-of-Fear." I paused for a moment at the awful name and looked furtively about me, repeating in a

lower tone, "Shadow-of-Fear." I took courage again and continued: "He couldn't catch you, so he made the smugglers think you were a spy."

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"Quite right, Tommy; full marks," said my father. "But ..."—and now he leant over me and said very slowly and solemnly—"how does he know the sign of the burn? How does he know, Tommy? How does he know?" And again something of the tone that had frightened me rang in his voice.

"Daddy, he's wonderful," I said; for that was my simple creed.

I think the childish words relieved the tension of his mind, for he laughed brightly, and tucking in the bed-clothes about my shoulders he told me to get back to my dreams. When I woke later all was dark, and he was sleeping peacefully at my side.

But that wasn't the last of my strange awakenings. It must have been two nights later when I found myself lying on my back gazing at the ceiling in that state of strange awareness which precedes full consciousness. Dimly the utter quietness of the room made itself felt like a pressure at my heart, and my ears seemed to be straining out to an infinite distance to catch some faintest echo of sound. And the room was full of light.

In sudden alarm I sprang up, but was immediately reassured, for my father was sitting with his arms across the table, his head thrown forward, asleep. I could see the slow heaving of his shoulders as he breathed.

My first thought was to lie down again, but the sight of a large parchment across which his arms were sprawled piqued my curiosity, and I didn't debate long with myself before I was out of bed and scanning a sheet of beautiful black script, but written in a language I didn't understand. And then a word or two told me it was Latin, but the meaning was quite dark to me, as my father hadn't so far succeeded in making much of a scholar of me.

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There were a few odd papers too with tracings on them like plans, some scored through, and some mere fragmentary sketches; but they conveyed little to me, half hidden as they were by my father's arms. I could see they were his own work, and by occasional underlined passages in the manuscript, and by odd notes jotted in the margin, I guessed he had been drawing up plans according to some mysterious instructions in the parchment.

The manuscript looked to me exceedingly old and frail. The edges were frayed and tattered, and here and there decayed pieces had fallen from the text itself. But it was obvious that great pains had been taken to preserve and restore it, and where the old ink was faint the words had been written over afresh. But it seemed to me that the task of deciphering it must be no easy one. A glimmering of an idea flittered through my mind, that it was somehow on account of this manuscript that my father wanted me to learn Latin.

All these considerations were merely momentary, for a glance or two showed me the whole picture there, and something of its meaning; and I began to understand what the mystery was which kept my father from his bed, though of course I couldn't guess at the contents of the ancient script.

I was for creeping back to bed again unheeded, but stopped short at my father's open eyes fixed upon me. He had awakened without a sound or a stir, and was watching me. I half wondered whether he would be angry, but with something of the matter-of-factness with which he had accepted my discovery of the Smugglers' Tunnel he said, almost in the same words, "Very well, Tommy, I'll show you."

Very carefully he turned a page or two of the manuscript, and the dry old stuff crackled beneath his fingers.

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"It's an old, old story," he began, "and I'll tell it you some day. But this is what is troubling me."

He folded a page back, and here instead of writing was an elaborate diagram; but the edges of this page were particularly worn, as though by frequent use, and part of the diagram was missing.

"Now, Tommy," said my father, drawing the lamp up close, "you've got good eyes. What do you make of this?"

He pointed with his pencil to the very spot where the diagram faded from the frayed edge.

I stooped over the table and strained my eyes to the sheet. What I saw looked to me like a long passage, but just at the crucial point where something important seemed to be indicated the impression was faded and blurred.

"Looks like a hole here," I said at last.

"Yes, yes," said my father eagerly.

"And something stopping it."

“Yes. ...”

I looked more intently. The passage was sloping down to what I guessed must be the opening, though this was off the page. Beneath the passage was a short stairway leading to a tunnel which followed parallel beneath the passage above; and after this the rest was comparatively clear. But the puzzling part was how the stairway joined the passage. Was it from beneath or from the side? The precious fragment which held the secret was missing, and only a roughly rounded line, which might have been a hole or a boulder, faded off the sheet.

I turned away blinking and rubbed my eyes, dazzled with the strain. “Sorry, daddy,” I said, “I can’t see. But I think ...”

“Yes, Tommy?”

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“I think there’s a hole in the earth, and a big stone on top.”

“Ah,” he said, “on top.”

There was a long pause, while he sat toying with his pencil. Then he turned to me again and said rather sadly, “You see, I thought it might have been Ebb-Tide Gate. But if the hole is in the floor ...”

“But,” I said, “there is a hole in the floor where the gate drops down. It might be ...”

“No, Tommy,” he smiled at me, “if there were it would be full of water. And see here.” He pointed to the diagram which marked the low-water line, and the steps were clear. My father continued, “If the hole were in the wall, you see, and fairly high, the steps would still be dry. But,” he added with a strange little smile, “there ain’t no hole, Tommy.”

He began folding up the document, very carefully, pressing it down page by page, and smoothing out the creases. And as he turned the last page I saw in great black letters, at the very end, the words:

MALEDICTUS SIT THESAURUS

Now whether by chance I had met the words somewhere in my random studies, or whether the haunting memory of some old story of my father’s lingered in my mind, I can’t say; but the meaning was instantaneously flashed across my brain, and involuntarily I exclaimed, “Accursed be the treasure!”

My father started, but smiling humorously said, "A little learning, Tommy ..." but left the quotation unfinished.

"Tell me the story," I said eagerly.

"Sometime, Tommy, sometime," he put me off.

"Now," I pleaded.

"But it's midnight, Tommy. And listen how the wind

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says 'Hush!' And see how black it is through the window. You'd dream."

"I like to dream," I said.

"Yes, Tommy, yes," he answered. "I'd like to dream your dreams. Golden sands, and a wide blue sea; and palms and reefs, and caverns, and long, white, racing waves. Eh, Tommy? But there are dreams that spring at you out of the dark and clutch at your throat and tangle you in a net, and your limbs are heavy and dead, and your lungs are bursting, but you can't utter a sound; and something laughs 'Ah!' and a hand goes over your face ..."

"Yes, yes," I said, as he paused.

But all he answered was "Not to-night, Tommy; not to-night."

So I went back to bed again quietly, and dipping my head into my pillow saw in glittering great letters that deepened into red like blood, *maledictus sit thesaurus*. And the night was full of dreams, for all that I hadn't heard the story; for the strange curse rang like a cry through my imagination, wailing menacingly like an echo from another world; and ever it seemed that a confined corpse struggling frenziedly in its prison shook a fleshless fist at me, and glared at me from hollow eyeless sockets, repeating and repeating a terrible threat which I couldn't understand though I strained my ears to listen. And though the earth was between us I could see the writhing figure tearing at the stifling tangles of its shroud, chattering insanely. Then suddenly I was the corpse myself; and I knew I was dead, but the grave-clothes were choking me; and with an agonized effort I heaved at the suffocating obstruction, and woke panting and puffing with the blankets about my face.

I threw them off; and the room was white with morning.

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CHAPTER VIII

PICARDINO

RUNNING downstairs I was aware of an unaccustomed music in the house. A high, vibrating voice was trilling and quavering to some twanging instrument; and breaking into the kitchen I saw a merry brown little fellow, with a ring of black stubbly beard about his lips, fingering what I afterwards learnt was a guitar, and singing with the abandonment of a bird. Without stopping his song he rolled a vivacious dark eye on me, winking with such a knowing merriment that I beamed my broadest at him, watching him with absorbed interest.

He finished his song and started speaking in a breath, chattering in a pretty musical broken English, calling for wine, and pledging the ladees of Italee, generally giving us to understand that Italy was the land for a roving eye and a merry heart, where the gerrls knew the meaning of love.

As he spoke he sipped at his wine, smacking his lips, and touching his guitar with nervous fingers; and before any one had time to take up the dialogue he was off on another song, throwing himself into it with a humorous passion that set my blood tingling in my veins. Before he had finished, my father came in, and as the song closed applauded heartily with, "Brava! Brava!"

The Italian seemed gratified, and swept him an elaborate bow; but my father held out his hand to the guitar, saying

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"Ah, the lovely strings; my fingers have itched for them for years."

The Italian hastily unslung the gaudy instrument from his shoulders, and handed it to my father eagerly, saying, "Ah, an arteest! He ees my brotherr. He shall say he have play on the gueetar of Picardino. He will remember me, yes? Picardino." And before my father could prevent him he had embraced him with fervour, greatly to the amusement of the host and the few early guests.

But my father wasn't in the least disconcerted, returning the embrace with unction; and freeing himself he fingered at the guitar, at first with some diffidence, but soon growing more confident, striking the chords boldly or rippling out the arpeggios.

He hesitated a moment before launching into a song, and then began on an old sea chantey:

“In Plymouth Town there lived a maid,
Bless you young women;
In Plymouth Town there lived a maid,
Now mind what I do say;
In Plymouth Town there lived a maid,
And she was mistress of her trade;
I’ll go no more a ro—o—ving
With you—fair—maid.”

We must have been a good day’s journey from the sea, but the company seemed to know the song and caught up the chorus:

“A ro—ving, a ro—ving,
Since roving’s been my ru—i—in,
I’ll go no more a ro—o—ving
With you—fair—maid.”

And this was the beginning of a merry contest, the guitar passing from the Italian to my father and back again, my

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father usually singing some gay sailor ditty, and Picardino some wavering high-pitched song of love. I listened delighted. Also Picardino, in his quaint English, was a wonderful chatterbox, full of stories of the road; and I found myself at times half wishing I might join him in his wanderings, and share some of his adventures of frolic and danger over the ways of France and Italy and Spain. I remember when I awoke from such dreams to reality I glanced toward my father feeling guilty of a kind of treason, and he seemed to be eyeing me darkly as though half divining my thought; till in penitence lest I had wounded him I stole up to him, and clasping his hand said, “I wouldn’t, daddy; I really wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t what?” he asked uncomprehendingly.

“I wouldn’t go with him; I wouldn’t really.”

My father gazed at me rather dreamily for a minute, and suddenly seeming to awake laughed and said, "Oh, that, Tommy. No, of course not; of course not." But I thought he didn't know either what he was saying or what I meant. I felt relieved.

Meanwhile Picardino was telling of a strange adventure in the north from where he had just come, as he said, followed by "terreeble voices, ach! so cru-ell, so chill, that my hair it stand upon its end, and my heart it knock like so"; at which he beat a rat-tat upon the table. It seemed that upon a lonely space of moor he had arrived one evening at a huge grey house, but on knocking for admittance no one had answered him. He was tired and hungry, and could see no village near where he could rest, so he had continued to knock, till slowly growing out of the hollow house he had become aware of a low and sorrowful moaning, "like one lost soul, for everr and for everr bound to a beeg wheel of pain." As he told his story his eyes

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started from his head, and his hair seemed to stiffen about his neck.

My father was clearly struck with the picture of the lonely house, especially when the host corroborated the story, saying he had heard rumours from travellers of a haunted mansion on the moors, some twenty or thirty miles maybe to the northward. Others, too, had heard of it, and the report wasn't encouraging to investigation, as the place seemed veiled in mystery and gloom, and no one could be found to inhabit it. The last tenant, it was said, had fled shrieking from it in the dead of night, and had died raving.

To all this Picardino chimed in with "Yess, yess," like a bird's cheep, repeating, "So, as I tell you; yess," as though the accumulated testimony pleased him, and finishing with, "Ach, there! Eet ees a place of speereets. I not go near eet; neverr!" He shuddered till it seemed that his bones were being shaken together; then again striking on his guitar he soared into another song, and at the close he passed round his hat with a flourish, and emptying the few coppers into his hand spat upon them for luck, and invoking on us the blessing of the Virgin Mary and all the saints, danced out into the street, where we soon heard his voice thinly quavering on a high note of romantic passion.

My father and I settled to our breakfast, and that over I was told to amuse myself as well as I could for the rest of the day, but to be back

before dark as we were to be off once more on our wanderings. I gave my pistol practice a miss that morning, for my first thought was to follow Picardino, and I scampered out of the *Snow Man* in pursuit of him; but he had vanished. I enquired of him from every one I met, and was sent southward in chase of him, but coming to a forked road I was at a loss which way to follow, and there was no one

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in sight. Turning to the left at a venture I ran a long way before I met any one, an old tramp as it happened sitting by the wayside; but to my eager questioning he slowly doffed his cap and rubbed his head, and declared that he couldn't rightly say, not but what he might have passed, but he had been winking his forty. His head nodded even as he spoke, and I ran on. But I didn't find Picardino. I turned back eventually to search along the other road, but was equally unsuccessful. However, I soon forgot my disappointment, and went coursing my own shadow over the heathery moor.

The sun was getting low when I turned my face homewards; and sighting the village from a rise, at first, I stopped short, and then started running with all my might, for leaping up red into the evening was a burst of angry flame. Something vaguely foreboding tightened at my breast, but I kept a desperate pace, and arrived panting to find a crowd gathered about the *Snow Man* which was wrapped in dense folds of smoke, with streaks of fire licking up from it like tongues from a black mouth.

My thought was uttered in my involuntary cry, "My father!" Some one in the crowd turned, and I heard him exclaim in surprise, "Why, here ee be," and another, "Ah, poor bairn!" in tones of pity.

I clutched the nearest villager, and again cried, "My father, where's my father?" looking wildly up into his face; but I didn't stay for his answer, for he turned his head uneasily away. I pushed past him, and squeezing through the crowd broke to the front, crying in an agony, "Daddy, dad-dee!"

I think I would have run headlong into the flames, for something told me without the need of words what had happened; but I was arrested by a strong arm, whose I don't know to this day, for I only struggled and bit and kicked at him,

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shouting through my tears, "Let me go to my daddy; let me go!"

“Steady, lad, steady,” was all I heard in reply; but through my frenzy I could hear a low voice droning evenly and monotonously, “However ee coom out o’ ’t fust time was a miracle. An’ then t’ go back again! Good sort too. ‘Host,’ sez ’ee, ‘that cooms o’ me carelessness,’ sez ee, ‘an’ here’s what’ll pay for ’t,’ ee sez; an’ out comes a purse o’ gold as ee might be t’ lord o’ t’ county.” I heard more of this through my shouting and struggling, though it wasn’t till afterwards that I realized the meaning of what I heard. But my struggling stopped when the voice changed to, “An’ all of a sudden ee sez, ‘Hark!’ ee sez; ‘Hark there!’ an’ takes a grip o’ me arm, so. ‘Ee’s calling me,’ ee sez; but I couldn’t hear nowt. ‘Ee’s there,’ ee cries something dreadful, ‘ee’s calling me; I can hear him.’ An’ before I knows what’s what ee’s into t’ fire again, here’s t’ bairn back again; an’ ee weren’t calling at all; an’ him rushing in t’ same him. Ah ’t’s sad, ’t is. An’ ee were a good sort ...”

The first words of the story had frozen me to attention. It was all so like my father that I could see it happening before my eyes. In my confused mind one picture stood out vividly and terribly clear: my father watching the blaze, and suddenly starting at my voice from the flames calling for help; and then the dash into the fire which closed like a curtain behind him.

I threw my arms up to my face and sobbed aloud; and everything went dark. ...

I came to consciousness again with a dim chattering in my ears which slowly strengthened and caught at my memory. And suddenly sitting up I cried, “Picardino!”

The little fellow was at my side in a moment, soothing me with hand and voice like a hundred mothers. But something

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began to grow cold about my heart, and the full recollection of my state burst upon me, and I whimpered like a baby, “Daddy! I want my daddy!”

“I’ll be your daddee,” said Picardino. “Ach, we’ll soon be merree again.” He prattled of the delights of the road, trying to comfort me, but I felt miserably desolate, and lay down and sobbed. He left me after a while, and presently returned with some hot soup. At first I waved it away, but the savoury smell was too much for me, and I was soon greedily devouring the appetizing stuff. And then I think I must have cried myself to sleep.

It was dark when I awoke, and I was strangely alert. I didn’t know where I was, but in a room below there was an indistinct murmur of voices. But

what caught my ear was a low, clear whistling from the darkness outside, and I sprang to the window and strained my eyes into the night; for the tune was my old favorite:

“Dance to your daddy,
My little laddy;
Dance to your daddy,
My little man.”

There was a pause, and I took up the melody:

“You shall have a fish,
You shall have a fin;
You shall have a haddock,
When the ship comes in.”

I paused in my turn, and closer on the air came the ending of the tune:

“You shall have a feather,
You shall have a fan.
Dance to your daddy,
My little man.”

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My heart was thumping wildly, and forgetting all my training in caution I rushed out of the room, clothed as I was in my shirt only, and down the stairs, and broke into a lighted room full of people, crying, “Daddy, *dad-dee!*”

I made for the door, but Picardino caught me by the arm. “How? What?” he said sharply.

Then my caution returned to me. I looked foolishly round and rubbed my eyes as though I had been dreaming, and beginning to whimper I said, “I want my daddy.”

Picardino was at once all mother to me, and was leading me from the room when the street door opened and a man entered. I just glanced at him, but he wasn’t my father; so I crept out of the room and up the stairs. But I wasn’t half-way up before I heard a terrible scream, and the sounds of a

scuffle. I stopped to listen, but the whistling was still in my ears, and that claimed my first attention. I ran up to my room and tugged on my clothes—Picardino must have undressed me— and then peering out of the window I gave a low whistle. There was a faint answer; and I looked down the wall to see if I could escape, my heart beating with I know not what wild expectation. I could see the ground beneath me, not a very deep drop, and the earth was soft, being dug up into a flowerbed under the window. I was soon hanging to the sill; and swinging myself away from the wall was on the ground on all fours. I sprang up and looked about me. Again I whistled, and the answer came, but not from where I expected it. I turned and crept forward, and heard a low whisper, “Heest! Heer, heer.” But it was the voice of Picardino, and his hand just touched me.

I shrank back, at a loss to understand, but my amazement was cut short by a great figure springing out of the dark, and I heard a faint cry, and footsteps crashing away

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through the night. At last all was silent again, and I was alone.

I stood still wondering what it could all mean. Then the door of the house opened; or the inn, I should say, for it must have been an inn; and dark figures appeared against the sudden light talking excitedly. I slunk into the shadow, thinking it best to make my escape from such a place, not knowing what dangers might be lurking for me there. And then I felt a warm hand in my own, and my father’s voice was whispering “Shhh!”

For a moment I stood fixed to earth, my blood in a whirl; then turning I flung my arms about my father, and buried my face against him to stifle the sound of my glad sobbing; for I was unstrung by the agony and excitement of the past few hours, and the revulsion of feeling was too much for my self-control.

But I soon mastered myself sufficiently to creep quietly away, holding my father tight by the hand, fearing lest somehow he might escape me again.

The night was warm, for the summer weather wasn’t over, though the year was advancing; and we lay beneath the heather. And there my father told me something of the story, while the burning inn still reddened under the sky.

“You see, I’m dead now,” he said. “I died in the fire.”

“Daddy!” I exclaimed in terror, clutching him; for I was a superstitious child, and it would have seemed no very strange thing for me to be talking to my father’s ghost.

He laughed: “Not dead to you, Tommy.”

And then I understood.

“But to Shadow-of-Fear?” I said.

“You’ve got it,” he answered; and explained how rushing back through the fire to our room he had climbed out of the

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window which opened on a back-yard, no one seeing him, and had hidden himself in the heather. His plan was to have found me, and together we would have fled away, every one supposing we had perished in the flames. But somehow he had missed me, and later seeing me with Picardino he had stalked us, hoping somehow to steal me back, but fearing that his ruse had failed.

But one question worried me. “Did you really burn it on purpose?” I asked.

“Ah!” was all he replied.

And I fell asleep, too tired and confused to solve the hundred mysteries which were beating in my mind. Who fired the inn? And why? And how was it Picardino had returned and carried me away? And why had he vanished so suddenly?

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CHAPTER IX

SUNSET TOWERS

WE must have lain low for a long while, or the summer must have broken very suddenly, for when one late afternoon we set out for our new home, my father telling me we should be able to rest quietly now, there was more than a breath of winter in the keen clear air. I remember as we strode forward, silent for a time, how I watched my breath making a cloud about my face, which I conjured into airy visions of Fairyland; though my Fairyland wasn't a place of beautiful enchantment, but rather one of subtle spells and secret workings which mingled with our human destinies, thwarting them and twisting them awry like the under-currents in a river, or like the oozy bed-weeds that cling about a swimmer's legs entangling him and dragging him downward into the mud. The curling vapour of my breath, tinged to a faint blue, was like some evil emanation, formless yet with a thousand forms melting and merging into one another, like a menacing spirit hesitating to strike, still hovering about its victim, soon to assume its final shape of doom. I think perhaps my mind was dimly aware of the story of the genii imprisoned for a thousand years in a shard beneath the sea, and when at length drawn to earth and set free by some miserable fishermen, steaming out in a towering cloud above the terrified wretch, and threatening him with ruin. For there seemed to be a presence and a shadow beside us and above us as we stepped together across the lonely swelling rises of the moor, and I was

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vaguely troubled, half wondering whether like the fisherman in the story we should be able to lure the menacing thing back into its prison, or whether we should be enfolded in its snares.

All this time we had been making northward; and as we topped a rise we saw on a hill before us, lying away to our left, a great straggling mass of grey stone which my father told me was our new home. I stopped to gaze at it, and felt a throb of delighted awe at the prospect of its huge loneliness standing up into the evening, grave and like a creature on guard, with eyes fixed steadily on the empty distance. Instinctively I looked away to the right, where all was a desolate stretch of abandoned moorland, so lonely

that it seemed like the sea, and sniffing I thought I caught a scent of salt and weed.

“How will it be, Tommy?” asked my father, and for answer I tightened my grip of his hand and gave a glad sigh.

We stepped down into the valley, and lost the setting sun; but rising again as we approached our new home we saw its red rim dipping below the line of hill before us, washing the western sky in a scarlet glow, against which the walls and towers of the great building stood out black and secret, as though now the eyes of the creature were turned in upon itself, brooding on some dark and terrible mystery in its own breast.

“Daddy,” I said, “we will call it Sunset Towers.”

As we drew nearer, its immense form seemed to grow above us like a dark cloud rising out of the earth, and it was as though we were walking into the heart of a shadow; but though with each step we took the feeling of awe and wonder increased upon me, and though a low murmur as of sad voices strengthened as we approached, it wasn’t till our feet set the echoes ringing under the archway that I realized we were in the haunted house of which Picardino had told us.

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We found some cold food laid for us, but there was no other sign of any inhabitant besides ourselves. And yet the fire was ready for lighting, and the lamp was full of oil, and when I went to bed I found everything laid ready as at an inn. But I was too tired to puzzle out what all this meant. We had had a long tramp, and I was soon asleep. But once in the night I awoke to hear that same strange moaning in the air. It seemed to come from nowhere, yet filled the whole house like a presence, as though indeed the house was a living creature that was hurt and was sobbing dumbly to itself.

With the morning of course the vapours of the night were dispelled before the disillusioning white clearness of the day, which lays bare our mysteries with a mocking shrug, as it were, revealing the secret workings, and laughing at our childish credulity.

For the preparations of the evening before were easily explained by the arrival of an old dame from the nearest village, some three miles yet to the northward, and hidden down by a river valley. She was busy about the house before I was stirring, and had prepared a savoury breakfast by the time we were dressed. She was an ill-favoured old creature, battered as it looked by the storms and weather of that wild region rather than shrivelled

with age; but beneath her crust of wretchedness she had a kindly enough heart.

During the morning I heard my father expostulating with her. As far as I could tell he was trying to persuade her to come and lodge in the house, but though she was perfectly willing to work there during the day rather than let the poor bairn die of neglect, yet she would rather cross through a blizzard morning and evening than spend a single night in the evil place. And then it was her turn to expostulate with my father, wondering, as she said, to find us alive in the morning,

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and telling him it was wicked to bring a child to such a house. At this he laughed, and dismissed the subject.

So the old dame continued to come with the morning and vanish with the night, at each parting fervently praying that we might be spared through the darkness. I think she was surprised to find us day by day not only spared but flourishing on the haunted atmosphere.

We had only one other visitor, the landlord. How my father had rented the house, I don't know; but the landlord, a ferrety little man, must have been glad to find a tenant, and called to see how we were faring. He found us very gay, and by no means wishing to quit.

And then my father conceived the idea of sending me to school. At first I was excited at the prospect, and tramped willingly enough the few miles to Rancey Bridge, where there was a fair-sized school for boarders and day scholars, standing on a hill that sloped down to the Rancey River. But as my school-days have nothing to do with my story, except that it was at Rancey Bridge where I met Worthing Bright, I needn't dwell on them. Indeed the only thing I learnt there was how abnormal my life had been, and what a wonderful father I had; but judging by what I heard I had no desire to change either the one or the other, for the normal and the ordinary smacked of tameness to one of my experiences.

Not that life was entirely uneventful. For I soon found that scholarship wasn't the best fun in the world, and after a period of grumpiness I set to work to enliven the dull hours of study, and with such success that there was a sort of revolution in the affairs of Rancey Bridge, initiated by my drawing my knife on Staggers, the usher, who was threatening to birch me, and driving him from the room.

Naturally this created an uproar, and for a moment I was

heralded as the hero of a new age; but the excitement was short-lived, for the time at any rate, for Worthing Bright appeared at the door, and the tumult died down.

Now Worthing Bright was smaller than myself, though some three years older; but there was something in his presence and personality, and in his straight, neat, commanding little figure, that cowed the most rebellious. I had frequently tried to make a stand against this domination, which my reason told me was absurd, but I had never come off victor. A cutting word and a cold stare seemed to melt all the strength from my nerves and muscles, and my fists would fall open foolishly, and bowing my head I would slink away.

It was much the same on this occasion. He stood at the door and looked at me. I summoned up all my bravado, but there was no moral support to be had from my fellows, already subdued. I was flushed and excited, and raising my knife I made it quiver above my head. But he gave me a look of pitying scorn, and said, "Let's play at being pirates," in a tone of such sneering emphasis that I felt convicted of conduct fit only for a girl of three.

A minute later Stagers returned reassured, and I took my thrashing without a struggle.

When it was over I turned away and would have left the school, not intending to stay any longer at such a place. But at the door I found Worthing still on guard. "That was well done," he said. "Now, don't spoil it."

I faced him for a minute, but he pointed me back to the room; and I obeyed.

I spent many troubled nights puzzling out my conduct, trying to whip myself into a fury against Worthing, for I knew well that if I were to be revenged on him it would only be in a moment of frenzy. But all was of no avail. I was

struggling against something which had mastered me; and that wasn't the greater strength of my antagonist, but the strange knowledge that somehow I loved and admired him, and would give my life if he were in danger. It may have been his spiritual power which dominated me, or it may have

been the admiration in his voice, usually so scornful, when he had said, "That was well done," which set vibrating some chord of affection in me; but however it was, I knew for a certainty that I had found not an enemy but a friend.

And the friendship deepened, though it was a strange one; for Worthing was my opposite in every way. He had an intellect like a sharpened knife, making my brain in comparison like a cushion or a cloud, a dull soft sort of thing. Naturally he was high up in the school, which added to the strangeness of our friendship, and his whole outlook and morality were as yet things unknown to me. For he was intending to study law, and already he had a large share of the lawyer's coldness and aloofness, looking clean through the human elements of a question to the legal considerations beyond. And this was one of the things which marked him out unique among his fellows, for though respected and even feared by everybody he hadn't a single friend; and naturally so; for being deeply impressed by the dignity of law and order, living as it were in the shadow of his future career, he had constituted himself a sort of self-elected champion of the authorities, lending them the support of his extraordinary influence, lecturing us even on the necessity of obedience, and somehow impressing us with the absurd childishness of rebellion against established rule, though needless to say the impression melted with the closing of the door behind him.

But though his intellect was so keen and his personality so electric, he had nothing of the bulk and muscle which about

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this time I was beginning to develop at a prodigious pace. I could have crushed him with a finger, yet he subdued me with a glance.

I don't intend to describe the full course of our growing friendship. At first indeed I struggled against the feeling of affection which in my heart I knew I felt for him. I think it must have been the sort of affection a dog feels for the master who is gradually taming and training it and breaking it to his will. Perhaps in my feelings towards him there was even an element of pity which helped to cement our comradeship, for he was so utterly lonely that in my heart, though inveighing against him, I yearned towards him. And certainly his courage, though not of the hardy physical type which I was best fitted to understand, appealed to my sense of the heroic.

I think the clinching incident which at length united us was the result of one of my yarns to my fellows. For living as I did in the famous haunted

house, and hating been the companion of smugglers, not to mention the stories I had drunk in from my father's lips, I must have seemed to my mates a very treasure-house of yarns, and my vanity didn't urge me to hide my light under a bushel. It was during one of these yarns that I looked up to find Worthing listening to me. I stopped, feeling guilty somehow of babyish superstition, for my story was one of ghosts, and the scene of it I had laid quite unwarrantably at Sunset Towers.

I waited for Worthing to speak, and at last he said, "Of course you know that's all rubbish."

I felt wounded in my pride, especially as the story was one of my father's, and the insult seemed to glance off me and strike him; so I answered hotly, "You may sneer, but you wouldn't spend a night alone in our haunted room."

"I'll do it to-night," he answered without hesitation.

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I was taken aback, for first of all our house had no special haunted room that I was aware of, though I knew several rooms where a night alone would be distinctly unpleasant. But chiefly I was alarmed because I knew I had committed myself. Worthing would insist on the ordeal; I knew him well enough for that; and I was frightened at the possible consequences.

Whether I believed the old place was haunted or not, I can't rightly say, but the mysterious wailing voices still clung about the air more like a pervading feeling than an articulate sound, though on some nights when the wind was high there seemed to mingle with it a shaken sobbing unspeakably desolate that caught at one's very heart and set it throbbing with an ominous presentiment of impending evil. And lately the crying had taken on such a note of human pain that I had often started awake at night shaken to the soul with pity, and feeling an urgency upon me to rise and search out the suffering thing wherever it might be hid, and soothe it with what consolation the living might bring the dead. And looking at Worthing with the memory of these things in mind I felt a reluctant compunction at submitting him to such a trial. For I knew something of that creeping terror that comes with a strange sighing on the night, and I didn't think he fully realized what he was undertaking. And at this moment it came to me with a shock how dearly I held him, and if possible I would have drawn back.

"Not to-night," I said, feeling about for some way of evasion. "Tomorrow, if you like."

“So that you can prepare a ghost for me?” he said coldly.

“No,” I cried, “no, on my honour. But—but I must tell my father, and get a bed ready for you, and so on.”

“To-morrow then,” he agreed.

Now the next day was Saturday and a holiday, so I said,

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“Come in the morning and we’ll spend the day together. Have a look round the place, and that.”

“Right,” and he turned away.

I didn’t tell my father till the next morning, when I was already expecting Worthing to arrive. I didn’t at all know how my father would take the information, but as it happened it seemed to amuse him, and he raised no objection. It seemed to me as though he saw no danger, and I said questioningly, “But suppose there is a ghost, daddy?”

“Ghosts,” he answered with a laugh, “are like miracles. They only happen to people who believe in them.”

Worthing arrived early, and we spent a splendid day clambering about the old mansion. Half of it was in ruins, and the habitable part had been partially bricked and partially boarded up. My father and I shared a room at the top of the first flight of the great oaken stairs. It was a huge room, and its mere spaciousness made it an eerie place at night, for the little circle of the candlelight intensified the shadows in the corners. And there was a great wardrobe by the fireplace which suggested secret things, and facing it across the room a tall mirror by my bed which played unholy tricks with my reflection in the dark. This was bad enough; but at least the room was in the main body of the house. But before we could reach the room which Worthing was to occupy, an archway on the landing, which had been closed before we took possession, had to be opened again. The room lay out among the ruins, and was fairly easily approachable, though not always under cover, by a long and tortuous passage and one flight of stairs; but though in the ruined part of the house the room itself was still sound and weatherproof. I had frequently been in it, having chosen it indeed as my own private sanctum; but my method of approach had been by an unorthodox route up a

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broken wall or two and along a perilous causeway, not to be attempted in the night.

Especially on such a night. For during the day the wind began to rise, and before sunset half a gale was sweeping across from the north-east, howling dismally among the turrets and corridors of our ruinous home, and wailing down the great chimney of our dining-room, puffing the smoke out in great blue clouds.

It was a night for strange stories, but there were no stories as it happened. In spite of the increasing wind, which tore at the great lonely house, shaking it to its foundations as though envying it its place there on the hill, and grappling with it like a foe to root it up and send it flying headlong, Worthing remained calmly by the fire talking to my father in the most matter-of-fact voice as though nothing unusual were to take place that night. As for me I was straining out to catch the first echo of that bitter cry which I knew would soon come wailing in the heart of some great burst of wind, thinner but more piercing than the gale itself. And when at last I thought I heard it I looked quickly across at Worthing, but he seemed to have heard nothing; and my father was evidently lost in the conversation, for he showed no sign of having heard anything other than the wind..

I felt left out in the cold, as though all the responsibility of what might happen this night were thrown upon my shoulders. Or rather upon my heart, for it beat heavily, and with the deepening darkness throbbed with uneasier forebodings. And then there came a crash at which I sprang to my feet, so unstrung was I with anxiety. But my father listening for a moment said, "Some old chimney, I suppose," and resumed the conversation. I sat down again, and tried to listen to what the two were talking about, but I remember

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nothing, for all my attention was strained out for that coming cry. And suddenly it came, sharp, as though at a swift sting, shrill, and breaking into sobs of self-pitying abandonment to anguish, to die away in a forlorn moan.

Again I sprang to my feet, and cried, "Listen!"

"You mustn't be afraid," said my father to Worthing, ".the wind does that kind of thing."

"Oh, daddy, it isn't the wind," I cried.

"Yes, Tommy, just the wind," he answered, looking at me, and throwing a half glance towards Worthing. I took his hint to mean that my friend

mustn't be alarmed before the ordeal. So I tried to possess myself in calmness. But when it was time to go to bed I was shaking with fear, so much so that Worthing noticed it and said, "It looks as though you're to sleep in the haunted room instead of me."

"Oh, Worthing, don't go," I said.

He looked at me coldly and answered, "Oh, so that's what all this little farce is about, is it? You want to frighten me from the attempt? Come."

That stung me, and without a word I handed him his candle and took my own, and together we went up the echoing stairs, out under the archway, and wound our way along through the twisting corridor, shielding our candles as well as we could when we came to some half exposed space, sometimes standing crouched against the wall till a gust had spent its fury and swept by, and then on again, till puffing with the journey we arrived at the haunted room. Once more I would have begged him to turn back, and I did say, "Let me stay with you," but he froze me away from him, and I turned and left him there alone, beating my way back through the night and wind to my chamber. But once I heard a moan so near me that I stopped as though petrified, and held my breath to listen.

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But just as I breathed again, a deep draught, I thought I heard the sound repeated, but it was drowned in my breathing. But what I did hear sounded strangely like a little chuckle of some mocking and evil thing, so that I stepped on hastily, heedless of my footing, and arrived at my room in a fine state of terror. And there I sat on my bed, hearkening to the sounds of the night, and bitterly reproaching myself, but unable to still the absurd thumping of my heart and quivering of my limbs.

At length I controlled myself sufficiently to pull off my clothes and scramble into bed. But there was no sleep for me. Long after my father had crept in beside me I lay listening, listening for I knew not what; for I felt the growing conviction that soon there would come a clear call for me, and I should have to arise and go to meet what fate should send.

And all the while the wind came rushing from the moors, to whirl about the ruins as in a witches' dance, shrieking and clamouring and tugging at the walls, and raced away in scampering gusts far into the distance. And through it I caught faint echoes of that ghostly moan, a kind of *Ughh! Ughh!* of unutterable pain. I couldn't help thinking of Worthing, alone there among the crazy ruins, and wondering how the night was passing for him.

Likely enough, I thought bitterly, he was serenely sleeping while I was tossing in a fever on his account; for I knew that if it hadn't been for him I wouldn't have suffered all this terror, for this night was no worse than others had been; and to me ghosts weren't alarming things, but creatures that gave to the night a delicious shuddering thrill. And so tossing and listening I fell at length into a troubled sleep, to be awakened by a shattering cry that rang in my ears like an echo. I sat bolt upright, my heart hammering; but my father didn't move. How was it

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possible? I asked myself. How could he sleep through it? I felt out towards him and whispered, "Daddy!" I didn't notice till then that I was gasping as though I had run a race. I touched him, and felt his chest rising and falling calmly and evenly. I lay down again, but I was wide-awake, and I was telling myself that Worthing was in danger, and I ought to go to him. But I dared not. So I lay awhile listening to the wind as it howled through the night, till I grew calmer, strangely calm, and a new courage came to me. "This is all nonsense," I said. "I'll go and see."

I crept noiselessly out of bed and pulled on a few clothes; lit my candle and left the room, turning at the door to see that my father hadn't awakened. On the landing it was very gusty, and a racing puff caught at my flame, nearly extinguishing it. I guarded it with my hand, and made for the archway. Going was very slow, for with each step my candle nearly blew out, and in the darkness I should have been lost. So I crept on slowly, my attention fixed to the flame. It was an eerie journey, for I could give no heed to what lay ahead of me, only sparing a glance now and again into the darkness around, and feeling that if anything lay in wait for me I should be an easy prey. This feeling of helplessness increased upon me as I pushed further and further into the night, and felt the first bite of the cold air that warned me I was coming to the more open parts. How I expected to keep my candle alight I don't know; but I managed it through the first exposed space, waiting for a pause in the wind before I crossed, and reaching shelter as a huge gust raced out of the north and screamed overhead with a hundred mingled cries of pain and wrath and laughter. I rested a moment, for somehow my slow passage left me strangely breathless and exhausted, and I was all a-quiver with nervous apprehension, feeling that I was stepping

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deeper and deeper into some unknown snare. In spite of the crying gale, the air seemed to be tightening around me, the darkness closing in. Again and again I stopped, peering about me and ahead, and always it seemed that a luring shadow sank into the blackness as though dragging me on and still on. But I kept my attention on the flame of my candle, guarding it as though it were the last spark of my life, till I came to the stairway. I felt for it with my foot, but couldn't find it. I took a step forward and felt again, but it wasn't there. I held out the candle and gazed into the dark. There was no stairway at all, only a black length of corridor as far as the little light could pierce, and I began to wonder where I was. I traced over in my mind the way I had come, with the growing fear at my heart that I was lost somewhere in that wild ruin in the dead of a tempestuous night. But I wouldn't give in. Again I felt for the stairs as though they might have miraculously grown there while I was thinking; and again I retraced in imagination the way I had come. And then faintly behind me I heard a low clang as of a closing gate, and the blood ran cold under my feet. I turned quickly; too quickly; for a breath caught at my candle, and with a leap and a flutter the flame went out. But with the last of the light I saw a pale face at my shoulder, very thin and filmy, with black hollows at the eyes; and as I gazed horror-stricken it faded into the darkness, and I heard a low sigh breathed so close to me that the thin breath seemed to fan my hair. For a moment I was too terrified to move. Then I think a frenzy must have possessed me, for with a courage not my own I stepped boldly forward and clutched at the empty air. It yielded to my outstretched hands, and I stumbled and struck against a wall, but steadying myself I felt my way forward till my fingers closed on something cold and hard; and again I heard a sad moaning. And

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then a sudden horror struck like a knife at my heart, for I was gripping the fleshless fingers of a skeleton. I shrieked, and fell to the floor unconscious.

It was in Worthing's room that I came to myself, and Worthing was throwing water on my brow. The horror was still upon me, for waking to see his face above me it was as though I were again in that dreadful corridor with the face of the spectre fading from my eyes. I tried to scream, but Worthing clapped his hand to my mouth, and bade me be quiet in a voice of such command that at once I felt in possession of my wits.

I sat up and looked about me.

“That’s better,” said Worthing; and added, “So you’ve had enough of playing the ghost, have you?”

At first I didn’t understand, and then I cried indignantly, “Worthing!” and with my anger my courage came back to me.

“So?” he questioned.

“Do you think ...” I began.

“Think?” he retorted.

“I tell you; I swear to you,” I blurted out; “I thought I heard you scream, and I came to you. But I lost my way in the dark, and a door closed behind me, and my candle went out, and I saw a face, and I felt a skeleton, and I tell you ...”

But he laughed cuttingly into my speech:

“Well, you’ve had a bad time of it; you’d better lie down and go to sleep.”

It was only after long protestation that I succeeded in persuading him to believe my story; and then he seemed strangely uneasy.

“There’s something I can’t understand,” he muttered.

“Why, it’s the ghost,” I said easily.

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“Bah!” he scoffed me down.

So we lay down together till the morning, and the wind died away, and the winter sun shone bleakly over a frozen earth.

But though we spent the day searching the ruins, for it was Sunday and of course there was no school, we couldn’t solve the mystery of the night. We retraced my path as well as I could judge it, but there was no skeleton anywhere; and where Worthing had found me—for hearing my shriek he had come to my aid—there was only a solid wall.

“You must have gone clean through there,” he said seriously, “otherwise you couldn’t have lost your way without tumbling head first from the ruins.” But though we shook at it, and examined it for possible springs and locks, the wall refused to give up its secret. The only thing that marked it as different from the adjacent masonry was a patch of little punctures as though a shot-gun had been emptied into it at close range. So we searched and probed and questioned, but discovered nothing; nor did we even find my candle which to Worthing was the greatest confirmation of my story.

We didn’t tell my father of the adventure of the night, but somehow from that hour we felt sworn friends, and I never received again from

Worthing the cold chaff which made him so feared and hated at Rancey Bridge.

He visited several times at Sunset Towers, and my father was loud in his praises. He considered him a sane, level-headed fellow, just the kind of friend to have behind one. But it didn't seem to me that Worthing felt the same esteem for my father, and this was perhaps the one shadow on our friendship. And even I, watching the two, realized how my father needed such a friend himself.

Then the Christmas holidays came, and all except a few of the boarders went home for the vacation.

CHAPTER X

MY FATHER TELLS A STORY

CHRISTMAS was soon upon us; and waking in the morning I felt eagerly in my stocking, and was delighted beyond measure to find a bright new pistol, a long-coveted treasure. I was up and dressed in no time, and out into the frozen air. I soon had a target set up, and regardless of numbed fingers put to proof the steadiness of my hand and eye; till my father came out and dragged me unwillingly to breakfast, extracting from me the promise to put away the deadly weapon till next day, for there were a few boys left at Rancey Bridge over the holidays, and they were to come and spend Christmas with me. My father didn't want any accidents.

It was a cold clear day, and the ground lay a few inches deep in snow. We had an uproarious time, and ate a magnificent dinner; and in the evening we gathered round the dining-room fire to hear my father tell a story before it was time for my friends to tramp back to the school.

Now I was considered something of a story-teller at Rancey Bridge, but I had always insisted that I was a mere stuttering dummy to my father; so the excitement was intense as we gathered before the leaping flames, the only light in the room, and waited for my father to begin. He was sitting back half in shadow, with the red glow of the fire lighting his cheeks in swarthy leaps of colour, till his face seemed alternately to spring at us out of the darkness and sink back into the dusk beyond.

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I can't give all his story, for he kept us there two hours or more; and his words without his accent, always so hushed and tense, as though he were in the very presence of the things he was describing, would convey little of the impression he made upon us. For he took us right away from the life we knew, and we were afloat with a band of adventurers on the Spanish Main, with our schooner nosing out to El Dorado far across the sea.

We were all there on board that ship. The dark crafty little captain with eyes like hard black beads which glowed with an underflush of red when he was angry, terrified us when we felt his gaze upon us; for he seemed an evil man, and one without conscience or remorse, and in his company we couldn't know to what wickedness we might be driven; for there was no

question of disobedience though he should bid us pawn our souls to the devil. Then there was the burly savage of a mate, a sort of furious club in the hands of the wicked little captain; a creature ready and willing for all abominations, but lacking a cunning mind to plan the atrocities he gloried in committing. His huge wide smile of evil delight as he listened to some tale of cruel villainy from the captain, rubbing his great hairy hand relishingly across his mouth, was a thing to frighten the boldest. And so one by one the crew came before our eyes, for the most part decent enough fellows, but snared by some malignant fate into the clutches of that abominable pair. And lastly there was the priest; a lukewarm superstitious round little fellow, on the one hand in terror of the captain and his mighty shadow, and on the other hand in dread of hell-fire; and between the two fears living a life of haunted terror, torn between cowardice and conscience.

I remember there was a mutiny on board that ship before the golden coasts were reached. At least, the captain and the mate discovered a mutiny, probably for their own amusement to

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relieve the monotony of the voyage; and then there followed floggings and hangings, while the captain twitched his cruel and wicked lips, and the mate stripped his huge arms in brutal anticipation, and Jack Priest knelt and mumbled prayers, and ventured a timid word of protest, and was sent packing to his job of saying a Mass for the murdered and seeing them safely tossed to the sharks.

But the bloodshed was to bear a terrible harvest; and I remember how my father played upon our expectations, till we were in a fever of excitement, wondering what was to come of it; for gradually through the story the note of coming doom was emphasized so subtly, yet so insistently, that the ship seemed to be moving forward into the closing shadow of some terrible fate. There were warnings in the wind and in the sea, and the priest was whimpering with superstitious terror; and beneath the fear and submission of the daunted crew there were mutterings and low-hissed threats which were ominous of evil things.

So at length land was sighted; but the wonderful palms that waved overhead, and the splendid sun setting serenely beyond the tall dark stems, were but as an ironic smile of the brooding destiny which lay in wait for that ill-starred crew.

After this there was the search for the treasure, which the rumour that had led them there said was hidden in some secret tomb of kings in a lonely valley far away across the hills. But first there were natives to reckon with; and so followed exciting battles, but with the one inevitable result: the natives were defeated and enslaved, and driven in chained gangs before the conquerors for beasts of burden when the treasure should be found and captured. And then there was a weary march, with wild beasts to do battle with, and tormenting insects, and heat by day and cold by night, and fever, till it was a shattered

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company which arrived at length at the lonely valley beyond the hills; and the earth was bare and desolate, and there was no shelter, and for water only a trickling stream that feebly threaded its way along a shrunken channel.

But the love of gold was triumphant above the wretched weariness of the land; and the captain at least was undaunted, giving his orders like the sting of a snake; and the mate rose enormously and thrashed the slaves into obedience. But for a long while the search was unsuccessful, the valley guarding well its secret; till one day sounding along the hillside a rock rang hollow, and the entrance was found.

Then there was feverish labour, and the slaves were driven till they fell; and through tunnel after tunnel a way was cleared, and every one knew that the treasure was at hand. Then breaking through a low sealed door there was the sound of chanting, and before them a grotesque company of priests were at their worship in a strange shrine beneath the earth; and the walls were glittering with precious stones and gold.

There was silence for a moment as the robbers shrank back surprised; but the captain cried "On!" and the mate bounded forward and the crew followed, and without mercy or quarter the priests were slaughtered as they kneeled; save for one old fellow, who, standing before the altar, shrieked a terrible curse at the invaders, and laid his magic on the treasure, bidding it be ruin and madness and death on all who touched it. But before the words of his enemies could reach him he had drawn a knife and sheathed it in his breast.

Then the pillage started. By now the meaning of the mutterings on shipboard began to be understood. For there was a conspiracy on foot. The crew were divided into two parties, one abiding by the captain, the other

having elected a captain of their own intending to mutiny when the hour was ripe and

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follow their own leader. Moreover they allied themselves with the wretched slaves, promising them their freedom if they obeyed. And so when half the treasure was carried from the shrine, there was a sudden slashing of bonds and crying of orders and shouts and curses and the noise of stampeding men; for the mutineers had so contrived it that they should free the slaves who had sworn obedience to them, and at a given signal fly from the shrine, and rolling a tremendous boulder down the narrowing tunnel block up the entrance and so entomb their enemies alive. The plan was well arranged, and the signal was given. There was a rush for the door, for a party outside had loosened the great boulder till it needed but a push to send it crashing down the passage. So the last of the conspirators came flying 'for safety, and behind him, not quite understanding the business, but knowing something terrible was on foot, came the immense form of the mate, rolling out oaths and curses. But the boulder was already loosened, and lurching forward it gathered speed, and grinding the shrieking mate to the wall crashed into place, sealing up the door for ever and entombing the wretches beyond in a living death.

Then there began a terrible journey back to the coast; for it seemed to the rebels that the curse of the old priest clung about their spoil. Their leader, whom they now called captain, would wake at night to hear cryings out of the earth, and whenever he lay down to sleep the voices of his enemies seemed to echo through the ground, muffled but pitiful. And sometimes he awoke to think he was lying in a pool of blood, and sprang up shouting that the smell of murder was making him mad. And others too said they were being followed by an underground rumbling like the hollow presage of earthquake, and they declared the earth heaved beneath them as though something were struggling to break through. Even the natives felt the

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terror in their hearts, and by ones and twos they dropped their burdens and slunk away into the night, for they said they were touching accursed stuff and the gods were angry. So the watch became more strict; and as the number of bearers diminished the remnant were again chained and driven,

and the new masters were little better than the old. But it wasn't now the lust of gold that was making them cruel, but the secret dread that gnawed at their souls maddening them and making them like frenzied beasts rather than like men.

Then the fever struck them; and first one and then another stumbled from the file, and dropped behind crying piteously to his comrades to stay for him. But fear was upon that company, and they pressed on the faster thinking to escape the claws of disease which snatched at them from behind. And one night a storm arose from nowhere and smote at them with jagged barbs of lightning, and in the morning three were found horribly twisted, and scorched out of recognition. So they called the roll to see who were missing; and Jack Priest mumbled a prayer and scattered a handful of dust upon them, and they were left by the wayside for the beasts and the birds. And then they lost their way, and suddenly were plunging through a morass; and there two were trapped in the oozy soil, and sinking slowly cried with frantic appeal for help; but no one would venture to go near them. And before they had well disappeared, while yet their hands waved feebly above the rank mud, and their faces still gazed living at the sky, reaching upward for the last breath of air, the priest had crossed himself and gabbled a prayer for the welfare of their souls; and again they pressed onward. And another a snake bit, and he died raving; and another gathered poisonous berries, and perished writhing in pain. And ever it seemed the curse was upon them,

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dogging them at heel, snatching a victim here and a victim there, till the shadow was over all, and none knew when his own turn would come. For it might be a prowling beast in the night, or a slip from a rock by day, or some hateful creature of the river when one went down to drink: fate pursued them in a thousand forms, and snares were laid for them everywhere.

And yet through the whole of that terrible journey not a native perished, of those at least who stayed with them.

So at last they sighted the sea, and a cry of thanksgiving arose; but it sounded like a wail of despair. Broken and tired and shaken to the soul they reached their ship, half fearing to find it burnt or sunk; and carrying the treasure aboard they set sail with all speed and steered away from the ill-fated land.

But their doom wasn't averted; only delayed. For storm and calm alike took toll of their number, hurling them into the sea, or bringing black plague from the heat-laden air to settle upon the vessel like a brooding bird. They were wasted with illness and labour, and their home seemed at the other end of the world.

Then the captain conceived of a plan: he called upon the priest to bless the treasure and remove the curse which had been laid upon it. At first the priest was terrified, and refused; but, as usual, present danger was more insistent with him than future peril, and when he saw the men were desperate and would murder him if he held back, he consented. But during the exorcism a wind arose and blew out the sacred candles. And when he would have poured holy water upon the treasure, the ship lurched and the water was spilt. So the captain wearily bade him desist, for it seemed like struggling against all the powers of heaven and hell.

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Yet not even the priest said, "Let us throw the accursed thing into the sea."

So they clung to their gold and abided their doom. One by one the hand reached for them and they perished, and their comrades cast them into the hungry water, dry-eyed and unheeding as though they knew the thing must be, and only wishing that for them too the hour had struck. There were none left to man the ropes; but the sails remained spread or furled as might be, and the captain stood at the wheel like one in a daze, while the ship moved on to whatever wind might blow. Till at last before them rose the cliffs of England; but there were only the captain and the priest and one other left alive to see them. The captain and the priest didn't speak a word; they didn't even smile, but stood staring stupidly as though it mattered not at all whether this were England or the other side of the ocean. But the third man threw up his hands and let out a great cheer; but a vessel burst in his lungs, and he bent down in sudden pain choking blood, and fell to the deck dead. The captain looked at the priest, and the priest crossed himself, and going to the man muttered swiftly, and with his foot spurned him over the side. ...

So the story proceeded. I remember how the captain went mad, and wandering from place to place would tell his tale in penance, and so pass on and away. And none of us there but pitied him, for we knew he had been snared into his sin, and the judgment was over heavy. But the priest took

the treasure and would have devoted it to the work of Holy Church. So at first he built a chapel; but the foundation was ill-laid, and in a storm the holy house lurched and fell. And he built a hospital, but a fire broke out, and the place was burnt to its foundations. And he chartered a ship to take a band of missionaries to the heathen; but the ship struck an unknown rock at the harbour

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mouth, and sank. And at last he knew that the thing was accursed beyond redemption; so he sought out a tunnel in the earth, and winding through many passages and caverns he laid the treasure in a secret place, and with the aid of a company of men set a mighty stone upon the entrance, and went his way.

But before he died he felt the need of confessing himself to Heaven; for he knew that the guilt of all those deaths was partly weighing on his soul; so he wrote the story out fair and truly for the eye of Heaven alone, as he intended it, telling of the burial place of all that evil gold, and laying upon it the curse of Holy Church to reinforce the curse it already bore. But as he wrote the last word, and leant back to rest after his labour, a spasm caught at his heart, and he sank down dead. ...

I was expecting the story to end here; but there was more of it. But before my father continued he lit the lamp and passed round the wine. We looked at each other, very quiet for a moment; then breathed deeply, and lifted our glasses.

But I needn't repeat all the second part of the story, though it would show the wonderful fertility of my father's imagination. For the manuscript was found and passed on from one to another. And first this man and then that would seek for that hidden treasure. But the old curse and the new bore terrible fruit, for all who succeeded in touching the gold were smitten with plague or madness, or were beguiled unwittingly into some frightful crime which poisoned all their life with clinging bitterness and remorse. None escaped. And there beneath the earth, a temptation and a terror, that treasure still waited for any bold or holy enough to dare its menace or exorcise its spell.

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CHAPTER XI

THE GHOST

WHEN my father lit the lamp for the second time there was more than one white face; for the story had been told with such a creepy emphasis that we had been lifted away from familiar things to an atmosphere of stealthy influences and subtle spells. For a couple of hours or more we had lived in the grip of a fatal and powerful curse. Something which wasn't of the earth we knew had caught us in its toils. We had moved in the company of men whose lives weren't their own, whose very shadows seemed like avenging spirits stalking in their wake.

To look round once more upon the lighted room, to hear my father say cheerily, "Well, fill up again before you go," was to come back with an almost dizzying rush to common earth. But in a moment the room was once again full of clamour. Exclamations of delight and appeals for more rose spontaneously to the lips of most of us. But my father wouldn't indulge us further; and the glasses were raised and emptied, and my visitors were turned out into the cold night to make the best of their way back to the school.

As for me, I went off to bed. But my mind was in a confused whirl. For to me the story was more than a story. The thing had taken on a colour of reality. I knew it was no mere tale, but a truth; and a truth which was somehow of the utmost moment to my father and myself. For throughout the narrative

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many pictures had woven themselves into my thoughts. I could see the Mad Captain as my father had envisaged him to me that night in the woods; and I saw the curse not as an abstract thing, but as a concrete reality, embodied in that dreadful hag who had pursued us to the hut. I could see her slipping back the knife into the folds of her dress, waiting to spring. I could see her feeling for me in the straw and behind the cloak. And again the red flames lit up those terrible eyeballs of hers in their black hollow sockets. She became for me not a creature of flesh and blood, but a curse embodied; a thing that couldn't be killed by powder or by fire. And then old words of my father's came back to me: "Shadow-of-Fear can never diet" I seemed to

understand as I had never understood before .the meaning of the destiny which had enmeshed us. For there was no doubt of it now. I knew my father was seeking for that unhallowed gold; perhaps he had even found it, for I remembered of a sudden the words of the host of the *Snow Man* saying my father had given him a purse in compensation for his loss as though he had been a lord. The curse was certainly upon us; it was that, and no mere earthly enemy, that was hounding us from place to place. And as though in confirmation of my fears, throughout the course of the story, in letters that glowed ever brighter and more menacing, shuddered the words as though written in blood: MALEDICTUS SIT THESAURUS.

White as were the faces of some of my companions, my face must have been whiter still; for I remember how shaken I felt as I crept upstairs to the great dark bedroom, walking slowly .so that my candle might throw its light the farther into the blackness ahead; and how entering the room, and passing round to my side of the bed, I came with a shock of horror face to face with my spectral self in the great mirror. I remember

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how my nerves seemed to freeze into sudden numbness, for my eyes were staring fearfully and my face was drawn and white, so that at first I didn't know myself. And then the blood gushed back to my heart, enough almost to choke me; and setting down the candle I sat on the bed and gazed at myself in the glass, shaking as though in a fever.

But at this moment I remembered the pistol my father had given me in the morning. I had been true to my word, and hadn't taken it out during the day; but now, so unreasoning was I, it brought me extraordinary relief as I drew it from its hiding-place, and carefully loading it slipped it under my pillow; though what protection it could be against the impalpable destiny that overshadowed me I didn't stay to consider. I only know I was very much eased at heart, and was soon out of my clothes and in bed.

My father had at last told me the tale of the mysterious manuscript, as he had promised me he would some day do; and also, as he had said it would, it made me dream. Indeed it would have been strange if such a story with such associations to give it body and shape and presence hadn't made me dream, for my mind was full of vivid pictures, not merely half-formed filmy mists of imagination. There were eyes looking at me, there were hands feeling for me; and the eyes and the hands were those of the old witch, Bite-in-the-Dark. They were very real, for I had seen them. And all

the strange terror of the circumstances under which I had seen them stirred my soul to a foreboding uneasiness of imminent things. And even the pistol which I fingered under my pillow recalled that awful moment when my father's pistol had roared out in my hand, and the hut had filled with screams and clamour. What wonder then, that with everything focusing back upon that night, I returned in dreams to the child I had been, and was

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once again wrapped in the rug before the fire, while my father's voice waned and strengthened through my dozing, and the face of the Mad Captain, horrified by the haunting voices of the murdered men, glared at me insanely from the darkness, distorted by the leaping firelight into a frantic picture of fear and madness and remorse. But I can't say what my dreams were, for they were inextricably entangled; but I know that I awoke more than once in a sweat of terror, trying to shake off some nameless thing which had fastened about my throat. And now I was away with the doomed party seeking for the treasure in the valley of the kings, and now I was on that fever-stricken ship waiting dumbly for my hour to strike, and now I was the priest himself hiding that cursed gold deep under the earth; and turning to flee I came face to face with that hateful hag with the black hollow sockets and the flaming eyes, and the knife cunningly hidden in the folds of her dress. For always my dreams came back to that. Her evil presence haunted me in all my mazed wanderings, either visibly at some unexpected turn, or shadowingly so that I knew she was beside me or behind me though I couldn't see her. And that was the worse evil of the two; for at such times the agony was lingering, and the enemy seemed too powerful for me, fighting with unearthly weapons against which my knife and pistol were useless as thistledown; but when she appeared before me, it might be from behind some black and awful crag, or rising like an emanation from the very earth at my feet, or just suddenly there in front of me coming as it were from nowhere—when she appeared, terrified as I might be, the impalpable horror which had wrapped me about fell away, and with a cry of hate I was at her with my knife, or, drawing my pistol, blazed full into her evil face. And at such moments I awoke, and took comfort in the knowledge that it was merely a dream, and soon

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the night would pass, though it seemed interminable, for each dream seemed the passage of a lifetime.

But once I awoke from one of these struggles with the image of the old witch so clearly before me that I thought I must still be sleeping. I lay perfectly motionless, gazing into the darkness, and with clearing consciousness came slowly to the realization that I was awake, and yet the creature of my dreams was there before me. I closed my eyes, then looked again. Still there; not to my hand, but clear and unmistakable, the very creature as I had seen her with the firelight on her face, except that now it was the moon that lit up that ghastly countenance white instead of red, and with a steady glow instead of lurchingly like the leaping flames. The night was very quiet; but outside a faint wind was crooning gently, and breathing thin clouds across the sky. And with the waning of the moon the face sank slowly back into the blackness, and with its brightening it grew again, white and luminous against the dark. I couldn't see it move; but once it faded into the night, and when it appeared again it was nearer.

How long I lay and watched I don't know. It seemed an age, but I think it must have been but a moment, though my head swarmed with a confusion of ideas. My father saying, "I haven't seen her ghost," caught at my memory; and I thought how glad he would be when I told him in the morning that her ghost had appeared to me; for somehow it seemed to me that the revelation would bring him ease. I remember wondering too why a ghost should fade and grow with the moonlight; for I had always thought of ghosts as glowing with a radiance of their own. What it was that stirred me to action I can't say. It might have been the realization that the thing was drawing nearer; or, as I believe, the many visionary contests of the night, mingled perhaps with a stirring memory

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deep in my mind, had unconsciously led my hand beneath the pillow where I suddenly realized that my fingers had closed upon my pistol. Then indeed I knew what I would do. Slowly I drew the weapon out, and with infinite caution levelled it at the creature's face. And now I could see it visibly drawing nearer with a gliding stealth. Its arm was raised, and I caught the glitter of steel. But just then I pulled the trigger.

There was a splintering crash and a cry and the clang as of a door heavily closing; and my father was awake and shouting, "Why, what, Tommy?" I was out of bed and had the candle lit; and there before me Was

the great mirror with a wide jagged hole smashed in the middle of it, and with cracks like the threads of a spider's web running out in every direction across its face.

I stood looking at it stupidly, and said, "I don't quite know, daddy. I thought it was her ghost."

"Ghost?" he cried.

"Bite-in-the-Dark," I answered. "I saw her ghost."

"Ha!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," I said growing bolder. "She was there. She was coming towards me. She had her hand raised. She came very slowly. I could see her face. I know it was her."

But my father was looking away from the mirror towards his end of the room, where the large old oaken wardrobe filled the recess between the fireplace and the door. His attention seemed absorbed. And then he leapt out of bed and flung the wardrobe open, springing back quickly as though expecting something to jump out at him. But there was nothing unusual there.

"What is it, daddy?" I asked.

But he took no notice of me, still investigating the wardrobe,

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rummaging among the coats that were hung there, and tapping at the sides. Then he stepped away from it and looked all about it, scrutinizing it as though it held a secret, while I watched him at a loss to understand. And presently he went up to it again, and putting out his full strength tried to shift it; but it wouldn't stir.

"Come and help me, Tommy," he said; and I lent him what strength I had, but to no purpose.

"You see, it's* fixed," he said, as though that solved the mystery.

"But ..." I began.

"What, Tommy, can't you see?" he asked with a smile.

And there I saw what I had done. I had fired at a reflection, while the substance had escaped. And evidently my father thought he knew which way; yet there was no clue to the trail.

We didn't go to bed again that night, but went downstairs to the dining-room and rekindled the embers of the fire, and roasted ourselves before it till the morning. And then my father, breaking a long silence, said, "Tommy, I must leave you. The time has come. The game's against me."

“Is it the curse?” I asked.

He nodded.

So before evening I found myself an inmate of Rancey Bridge, feeling inexpressibly disconsolate with my father gone out of my life. And I know I cried bitterly to myself that night; for I pictured him fleeing alone into the darkness, and behind him the shadow of a closing doom.

PART TWO

CAPTAIN FIELD

CHAPTER XII

THE WAY OF A FRIEND

I SOON found that life had changed for me. I was under an authority now, rigorous and uncompromising, which didn't seem to understand in the least the natural instincts for freedom and self-expression of a half-wild boy like me. Already before the new term opened I had had two days' experience of the school cells, where I was shut up in solitude and darkness for some offence against the regulations, which I suppose was serious enough to the minds of the pedants who imprisoned me, but which to me seemed merely the natural corollary of my whole upbringing. And of course I was soon dispossessed of my knife; but learning caution I managed to keep my pistol safely hidden. It was Stagers who robbed me of my knife, for he remembered it from of old; and it was he too who brought me my stale crust and mug of water three times a day while I was in the cells.

I wasn't in very good spirits when Worthing returned, but his steady companionship soon restored me to something of my usual cheerfulness. I clung to him for a while with a sort of yearning affection because of the loneliness of my heart now that my father had left me and this strange narrow life had closed about me like a prison wall. And yet our friendship wasn't all milk and honey. For Worthing, with a passion I suppose of setting me in the right path as he conceived it, lectured me and scolded me, sometimes stinging me to the soul

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with his cold rebukes, till at times I broke from him impatiently, and in desperation turned to the wilder of my companions where I was sure to find an appreciative welcome. And then would follow some escapade, the more daring and risky share of it always falling to my lot, which would lead to a further encounter with authority and the inevitable flogging, and perhaps another day or two in the cells. And at these times Worthing stood silently by with no look of compassion; nor in my confinement did he attempt to break through to bring me any comfort, as I knew I should have done were he in my case. And when I was released he had such an air of passing it all over, as though I had committed some personal offence against himself

which he had forgiven, that it was difficult sometimes not to upbraid him for his callous indifference.

Once I remember he turned on me with a passion not usual with him, and said, "I suppose when you've made an unmitigated ass of yourself you want me to weep over you and stroke you and pet you like a baby! I tell you if you think that's what it means to be a friend, you'd better find some one else; that's all."

"Why, Worthing!" I exclaimed, trying to appease him; for he seemed almost on the verge of tears; an unprecedented thing, the mere possibility of which dismayed me.

"Look here, Tommy," he cried, "let's thrash this thing out once for all. If you think it doesn't hurt me to see you—to see you—"

"Flogged," I said, helping him out.

"Well, *you* said it," he cried, "*I* didn't," as though the mere mention of such a commonplace event were something terrible to him. He went on, still in the strange excited way which I couldn't understand: "If you think it doesn't hurt me; if you think I *like* it," he emphasized the word almost spitefully,

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"then you're just one of those blind shallow fools who think every emotion must be written large across the face. In my profession, Tommy, the face is a mask, not an index."

I could have laughed at the fine sense of self-importance which rang through the remark, but I only took his arm affectionately, and would have said something to mollify him, but he shook me off with, "I haven't finished yet," and continued: "I want you to understand me, Tommy; that's all. I tell you I think you a silly little fool the way you're going on; and just because you're my friend I can't think you're any better than you are. Also I can't help being fond of you; and that's what makes it so infernally hard for me to look on and see you behaving as you do. But if my friendship's to be worth anything at all, it won't be by pandering to your folly. That would simply make it a fawning piece of flattery which would do you more harm than good. And now you know."

He flung away from me, and left me gazing after him in amazement; for usually he was so reserved, so controlled, that I couldn't understand this unc customary passion. His eyes were moist as he turned away, and his whole face quivering. But when we next met he was the same severe little

figure as before, neat, commanding, uncompromising; but I thought I could feel beneath the mask something human stirring there in the shadow.

I was constantly suffering from remorse of conscience for some unkindness to my friend; for on the one hand my vanity was stirred by the evident admiration which my daring aroused among my fellows, and on the other hand I was constantly meeting with some stiff rebuke from Worthing, usually in the flush of success after some adventure; and the result was that my tongue too often proved a traitor to my real affection for

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him. I did my best to make it up by extra confidences as tokens of my repentance. Whether I overstepped the mark of prudence I don't know; but in any case if at times I thought I had done so, I felt reassured by my knowledge of his secrecy and reserve; a confidence to him was a sacred thing. And so it was that he learnt of my dealings with the smugglers, for I thought they had no concern with the central secret of my father's life, whatever that might be. But I didn't mention Drift-Wood Cavern, though I told all I knew of Ebb-Tide Cave and the Smugglers' Tunnel, for these were open secrets now and lay exposed to all. Also I remember I confided to him how my father always took me to the *Dolphin* for the summer. And as the spring was very near now, if indeed it wasn't already with us, I said my father would surely reappear some day and take me away.

But to all my confidences Worthing returned but little. He rather sniffed at my talk of smugglers. They were creatures outside the law; his natural enemies. All he told me was that he would soon be going to his uncle in London to study law. His father lived in York, but there was no opening in the provinces, Worthing informed me in his grown-up manner, for a fellow with real brains.

We paid several visits to Sunset Towers; for though my father was away, I thought it was only for a while, and I still looked upon the house as my own, and without scruple used to take what chums I chose for a scramble and a game there. But I was wise enough to keep my own counsel about the ghost and the skeleton. I didn't even tell Worthing of the strange visitation which had sent my father fleeing from the place. But we were both very much concerned to find the secret passage where I had lost my way and had gripped the skeleton by the hand. Again and again we came to the corner where

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Worthing had found me, but the wall continued to confront us, grim and unyielding, refusing to give up its secret.

I remember how I admired the business-like way in which Worthing set about his investigations. For my part, I gave the reins to my imagination. If a place seemed shadowy and mysterious I promptly concluded that it hid some secret door or stairway; but Worthing would point out how impossible that was by the mere configuration of the building. For he took careful measurements and made elaborate plans, till after some weeks every known corner of the huge straggling house lay clearly in its right place and proportion. And then it was obvious where the mystery was concealed by the spaces that lay blank and unexplored though according to the plan built in. In fact we could almost trace the path of the passage we were in search of; and that to me explained the mystery of that last night which my father and I had spent there. For the passage wound away from the corner where Worthing had found me, though of course on the other side of the wall, up a flight of stairs, into a chamber high up in the roof, and then down again by a twisting stairway, it must have been, by the side of the great chimney in our bedroom. And there it ended.

It wasn't long before we were examining the oak wardrobe; though still I said nothing of the ghost that had appeared there.

It was most tantalizing to know so much, yet to be baffled by a secret of the entrance. For tap and shake and scrutinize as we would, we learnt nothing. The wall remained stolidly dumb, and the wardrobe was firm and sound except for one worm-eaten panel in the side against the chimney. But though this looked suspicious, yet it gave no clue to the quest we were on.

Once I suggested knocking a hole through the wall; but Worthing pointed out that that would destroy the secrecy of

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the thing. So we persisted in our investigations whenever we were able to slip away for an afternoon.

There was one curious thing that puzzled us. We knew there was a hidden room high up in the house, and we knew where it was, though of course we couldn't reach it. But as far as we could see there was no window to it. Worthing suggested there must be a window somewhere in the roof, so one day we climbed up to search for it. And there we found that by clever planning and building the room still guarded its secret, except for the over-curious who were willing to risk a fall which would mean a broken

neck for sure. For we discovered that the great chimney-stack above the bedroom my father and I had used was much larger than necessity warranted, and was supplied along one side with a complete row of false pots. It was built almost foursquare, and it didn't need much astuteness to surmise that if we could only scale it we should find enclosed between its walls the window we were seeking. But it was too high to scale. However, having pushed our examination so far we weren't to be turned back merely by a risk; so we determined next time to bring ropes and grappling hooks, and climb the barrier.

Even Worthing couldn't quite conceal his excitement as we set forth one Saturday well equipped for the last phase, as we hoped it would be, of our search. Indeed, if anything could move my self-possessed friend to any show of excitement it was to feel himself on the clue of some mystery. And I suppose it was this lawyer's instinct precociously developed in him which always made him side with authority against rebellion.

But we were to be sadly disappointed; for arriving at the house we were met by the ferrety little landlord who soon packed us about our business, having first eloquently expressed his opinion of prowling urchins, not to mention house-breakers

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and thieves, and threatening to let them know at the school of our goings-on. Worthing looked at me amazed, and I turned to the landlord with, "But this is my father's house!" Evidently this was an unfortunate speech, for he burst out at me with a tirade which I couldn't quite follow, but the drift of it seemed to be that my father had quitted the place most unjustifiably. The sore point, I guessed, was that it was no easy matter to find a tenant, and so he bore a grudge against my father for having remained so short a time.

We turned away, for my part feeling very disconsolate, especially as now my fears seemed confirmed that my father had really left me, and hadn't merely vanished for a season. Worthing was very quiet, and I didn't break into his silence, for my mind was filled with doubt and concern for my father; and the new light thrown on his disappearance sent a sudden pain of longing to my heart. I felt very lonely and deserted, and I knew that above all things I wanted to see my father again. But spring was well advanced, and I told myself the summer would bring him. And as we walked back to the school I looked this way and that wondering if he were already lurking near at hand, waiting for a chance to speak with me. I

listened, thinking at times I could hear a faint whistling from far away, but all the while I knew it was merely my own fancy shaping the sound. Still I assured myself he would be wanting me soon; and there would come a sign. Though what the sign would be I couldn't imagine. I only knew that I must be continually on the alert to catch what slightest hint he would send me, be it ever so subtle or obscure. If he wanted me I mustn't fail him; I must keep my wits bright and ready for the signal that would come.

But no signal came that day; and my thoughts were suddenly

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whipped back to the present and the actual by Worthing saying bitterly, "So that's what you've been making of me!"

I didn't understand, and said so; realizing as I turned to look concernedly into his face that he was white with anger.

"House-breaker! That's it!" he exclaimed.

"Why, Worthing!" I cried, not knowing what to say.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked fiercely.

"Tell you?"

"That your father had gone."

"Why, I didn't know."

"Didn't know?"

"Honestly I didn't know. I thought he was coming back."

"Oh, well, then," was all he replied as we entered the gates.

But I could understand something of what his feelings must be. He to be ranked among the law-breakers!

My conscience was made of different stuff, and for me the search had by no means ended.

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CHAPTER XIII

TRAPPED

ACCORDINGLY, when I set out again, well provided with a coil of rope concealed around me under my cloak, a stout steel hook for grappling, a lantern, and my pistol, I didn't invite Worthing to accompany me. I tried to slink away from school unobserved, but Worthing must have guessed what was brewing in my mind, and outside the school gate I came face to face with him.

He gripped my hand, and looking straight into my eyes said, "Don't go, Tommy."

I laughed, and shook myself free.

"Don't go," he repeated. "You know now that the house isn't yours."

"But the secret will soon be mine," I replied.

He looked at me quietly for a moment, and said very decidedly, "Tommy, you're a fool."

Somehow I felt suddenly annoyed with him, though as a rule I could bear his rebukes without ill-feeling. It seemed so absurd to stick at such a trifle. What if the house was not mine! I hadn't been trained to the creed of *meum* and *tuum*. And the challenge of a mystery to be solved was one that I wouldn't refuse. Romance, adventure, this was my life-breath; and if there were pedants and landlords and other petty obstructions of authority to break through, so much the better.

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"I'm a fool, am I?" I said, and added stupidly, "Well, I think you're a coward."

He stiffened, and turned on his heel; and my anger died down like a flame beneath a drench of water.

"Worthing," I cried; but he walked on. And then I remembered how he had spent that night alone in the haunted room; and I had called him a coward. ... I knew I had merely done so under that foolish impulse of self-justification which makes us whiten our own conduct by blackening that of those who oppose us. As he walked away I was in two minds whether to follow him or not. But my business was urgent, and I told myself I could

easily unsay the silly word later on. So I pushed forward, and had soon forgotten the little tiff.

I took precautions this time not to enter the grounds where I was likely to be seen, and I was soon among the ruins climbing up to the roof by a way I knew well through long experience. Then came the real obstacle, the wall of the false stack, high, smooth, and with no foothold, approached by a steep, slanting roof which would throw me to the ground far below if I slipped. And owing partly to the ruinous state of the house, and partly to its original disposition, this was the only way of reaching the stack in which I knew lay concealed the entrance to the secret chamber. I crawled out on to the sloping roof, keeping to the edge where I could get a certain purchase for my feet against the level eaves, and when under the stack I lay flat on my stomach and looked upward along the slates slanting away above me to the wall standing stiffly up beyond.

I surveyed it for a moment, and felt just the least apprehension; but taking a grip on my nerve I bound the hook firmly to the rope and slung it up over the wall, then pulled in to see if it had gripped. It wasn't an easy matter to throw

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at all in such a position, and the first attempt was unsuccessful; but at the third throw the rope held. It was difficult to test it properly by taking the strain, for I was obliged to cling with one hand to the slates, and if I tugged at the rope and it came away suddenly I should probably lose my grip and be sent over the edge. However, I jerked it three or four times, and it seemed firm enough; then summoning my courage I took the rope in both hands, pulled myself slowly up along the slanting slates, and was soon at the foot of the wall. Before ascending I again jerked at the rope to test it for the last time, and feeling reassured began climbing up hand over hand. But I had scarcely mounted a couple of feet before I felt something give, and for a dizzying moment I hung in mid air expecting to fall, and gazing frenziedly for some possible crevice in the roof beneath me to catch my fingers in if the rope should slip. But it seemed to be steady enough now, and cautiously I recommenced the ascent. I was half-way up, when again there came that sickening jerk as though something were breaking loose; but knowing now that my only chance was to reach the top of the wall, for if I fell it would be with too great a force to stay myself, I scrambled on with desperate speed, the rope seeming to slip with every heave upward of

my body. And it was just as I reached the top, the fingers of one hand clutching at the stone, that the rope came away in the other hand, while I swung perilously, gripping at the wall with the bare tips of my fingers. But with a leap upward I caught at the top with my free hand, though I had to drop my rope to do so, and was soon safe astride the barrier looking down on the other side.

If I had been met by a blank roof I should have been in a perilous predicament indeed, perched up there, with no rope to descend by. But my gamble with fortune proved a lucky

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one, for enclosed within the walls of the stack, and only a few feet below me, was the window I had hoped to find; or skylight rather, for such it was, like a shallow dome looking up at me with a great round eye.

Before dropping down I gave another look to the way I had come, and saw, caught in a broken slate of the sloping roof below me, the rope I had dropped; but the greater length of it was hanging over the eaves. The thought came to me that somehow I must climb back and recover it before I left, otherwise it would remain as a tell-tale witness against me. And then I remember speeding a fleeting glance across the moors. I had never climbed as high as this before, and the prospect was wonderful. For winding far away I saw the Rancey River flowing out to sea, and I called to mind how I had seemed to sniff the brine when first I had come to Sunset Towers.

And with that I was over the edge, and examining the skylight for an entrance. Nor was I long about it, for it opened quite easily, leaving ample room for me to slip through. But I had to risk a drop, for there was no means of climbing down. I looked beneath me, swinging from the open casement; and judging the distance as well as I could in the shadowy room, dropped, and fell unhurt, though on all fours. And it wasn't till I was well in the trap that the realization came to me that if I couldn't find the secret of the doors from the inside I would be buried alive there; for to climb back the way I had come without a rope was utterly impossible. And then the memory of the skeleton came to me. Had another been trapped there too? And was that the end of it all? I shuddered.

But these thoughts were momentary merely, for I wasn't given to brooding. I think it was the hollow echo of my feet

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in that secret and deserted chamber that brought the horrid fear to my mind. I was soon glancing about me, taking stock of my surroundings. And with the first look round I was both relieved and dismayed. For the room, bare for the most part, was evidently occupied, or being prepared for occupation. In one corner was a small bed with posts and canopy; an old remnant of furniture, it seemed. But on it was flung a bundle of bedding which looked fresh enough, as though the bed were to be used that night though not yet laid ready.

This puzzled me, and I fingered the stuff, but could find no name. Nor was there anything else in the chamber to suggest occupation. The mantelshelf lay thick in dust; and the skylight above was so dirty that the light came through but weakly, leaving the panelled room in a half shadow.

I lit my lantern and turned to examine the entrances. One was quite obvious: a narrow slip of a door, opening, it seemed, into the side of the chimney. I guessed at once that this led down to the old oak wardrobe in the great bedroom below. I knew now where that apparition had come from and vanished to, and my first thought was to descend and investigate. But it occurred to me that there must be another entrance opening into the passage of the skeleton, as I thought of it. But there was nothing to show which panel hid the secret. Indeed I should probably have been searching for an hour or more if I hadn't noticed the marks of feet on the dusty floor disappearing into the wall; and tugging at the panel there it came open in my hands. If I had tapped for it I shouldn't have found it, for it was too solid to sound hollow to the knuckles.

I was growing more and more excited with my discoveries, but through my excitement I felt apprehensive, for it was clear that some one had been in the chamber very recently, and might

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come back again. If so I should be trapped like a rat in a drain, with no way to turn. Still, I decided to examine the passage first, and holding out my lantern before me ventured into the dark, trying to remember by the plan Worthing had drawn up what turns and stairways to expect. But there was little need for this; for, though the passage twisted and climbed and descended, there was no chance of losing the way, for there was only one way to take.

I pressed on step by step with the utmost caution, gazing intently into the darkness ahead, and testing every step before I moved forward; and so

intent was I on the process that I didn't notice what was on either hand till I suddenly became aware of a figure in a niche beside me standing very still. I turned quickly, and stifled a faint cry. For there was the skeleton; and at its feet lay my candle. I held up my lantern and examined the dismal thing. There were chains about its wrists and chest and feet, fixing it to the wall. It hadn't lost its way then and perished in the darkness, but had been imprisoned there by an enemy and left to die slowly and alone. I had enough imagination to picture the terrible deed: the mockery of the triumphant foe as the chains clanked into the staples; the cries of the victim, the frantic curses and appeals; the dying away of the footsteps, and the closing of the door; the terrible secrecy of the darkness, with death creeping out of the shadow by lingering degrees; the screams of growing madness, the sobs weakening into moans, the frenzied struggling at the bonds, the prayers, the mutterings, the hours of dumb silence. ... I stood there fascinated by the horrid details of that slow agony, realizing more vividly than before something of the meaning of the crime of the Mad Captain in my father's story. Little wonder, it seemed to me, that with such a picture in his mind of not one only but many of

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his comrades perishing so, and he the author of it all, little wonder if sleep forsook him, and his dreams grew frightful with avenging phantoms, and the light brought only troubled memories to torment him.

Then before I could move forward I heard a sound in the darkness ahead of me. I knew at once what it meant. The secret door was opening.

I turned and hurried back; and it was fortunate for me that the passage was a tangle of turnings, for otherwise I should have had to put out my lantern, or expose myself to the stranger. And something told me that the stranger was no friend to me.

I was soon back in the chamber, and listening heard feet moving nearer along the passage; and something too which stopped my breath in a hushed pause; for very faint and low came the murmur of a moan such as I had often heard in that haunted house. And then I could have laughed; for I said, the door is open, and the wind is blowing through. But I had no time to ponder on the sound, for the feet were approaching. I turned to the chimney, and opened the narrow door in the side, and before me was the first step of a spiral stairway, so cramped that as I entered I brushed both shoulders against the walls.

At last I reached the bottom, and there I paused again to listen. I could hear faint sounds above me, but I breathed freely when there was no step upon the stairs. For a while I was safe. So I held up my lantern and examined the wall in front of me.

From this side it was easy enough to see how the door opened. Two large steel bars, pivoting on their centres and working together, lay across the door, holding it immovably in place. But they were so well balanced that they could be lifted with a

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finger, and when released dropped almost noiselessly back into the well-oiled staples. A spring lever which could be forced inwards from the outside to raise them clear of the catch completed the simple mechanism.

I swung the bars from the horizontal, and the door opened soundlessly in upon me; and as I expected I found myself looking into the oak wardrobe. But what I wanted to learn was how to force in the spring from the outside. If I went away without discovering that my adventure would have been fruitless.

And then I heard some one coming up the main stairs. ...

What was I to do? If he came into the room I should be caught. And to ascend again to the secret chamber would be impossible, for some one was waiting for me there as well. I thought my best plan was to hide at the bottom of the little stairway. But as I was creeping back I heard the door above me open, and some one commence the descent; and at the same moment there was a fumbling at the bedroom door.

I didn't stay to think what to do. I crept into the wardrobe, blowing out my lantern, and shutting the door behind me, and crouched in the farther corner, hoping the darkness would conceal me.

So for a terrible minute I hugged myself into a motionless ball, hardly daring to breathe, and wishing I could silence the absurd hammering of my heart which sounded loud enough to betray me. And soon the secret door swung open, and there were two of us there in the great wardrobe. But the stranger had no light; and the darkness hid me. Then the wardrobe door was opened, and the stranger stepped out, shutting it softly behind him. I heard a faint cry which changed to, "Ah, it's you, Abou! You frightened me."

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A soft voice replied, "Pardon, my master; I did not know you were here."

The first voice continued, "Yes, back once again. There's no other place for me."

"It is a good place, my master," was the gentle reply.

Something in the tone of the last speaker soothed and calmed me. His voice was placid and comforting. I thought I should like to see his face. But the other speaker was troubled, though his voice wasn't unkindly. Presently he uttered in a piteous sigh so unexpected and so sorrowful that it seemed to melt my very heart to tears, "Oh, Abou, Abou, why will he still pursue me? Why will he not have mercy?"

"Have courage, my master," Abou replied in that suave and gracious voice of his which seemed to steal about me like a charm, though I had hardly heard a dozen words of his uttering. "Have courage, my master, he shall have mercy."

"But will it never end? Will it never end?" again came that broken cry.

"Courage, my master. It will end."

For a while there were subdued movements in the room as though clothes were being unfolded and laid ready for putting on. I was tempted to feel for the secret door, and if it were open to creep away and out through the passage. But perhaps the door was closed; and Abou might open the wardrobe at any minute. The sound of clothes being unpacked made me tremble lest the wardrobe might be needed for use. Then, too, I was curious to learn more of the mystery into which I had stumbled. Here seemed even another case of a hunted man. I began to philosophize in my boyish way, wondering if life were nothing but fleeing and pursuing. My father's life was a constant flight. And then I remembered Dirk and his vow, and wondered whether that treacherous King's Man

had paid the forfeit yet. And here was another victim under the shadow of fear.

My thoughts came to a sudden stop with Abou's voice saying, "All is ready. Will my master come up to his room?"

"No Abou, no; not for a while."

Then the bedroom door opened and closed; and there was a sound which jarred alarmingly into my consciousness—the turning of the key in the lock. Before I could grasp the full significance of this, the wardrobe door

opened. I peeped stealthily from my corner, in spite of my terror, and saw a slim, darkish man, with a big black beard and whiskers framing his face; but of his face and its expression I could see nothing. He had a slender instrument in his hand, but how he applied it to the secret door I couldn't see. It opened, and closed behind him.

I listened for his steps as he ascended, but so silent or so muffled were they that I could hardly distinguish them. But I could hear enough to know that he was safely landed in the room above. I breathed freely, and cautiously opening the wardrobe crept out.

Once more I was in that bedroom I knew so well. Before me was a new mirror in place of the one I had smashed. For a moment I stared at myself, feeling very guilty, as though I had been caught at some prank. But I had no time for idle fancies. I went quickly up to the door and tried it; but, as I feared, it was locked on the outside. I was a prisoner.

Even if later it were possible to venture back the way I had come, how was I to open that secret door? Evidently some kind of instrument was needed, and I had nothing; nor would I have known how to apply it had there been one ready to hand.

For a moment I gazed stupidly round the room, idly noticing

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some travelling gear thrown on a chair; then mechanically went to the window, though I knew perfectly well that I couldn't climb down the wall, and the drop to earth was far too deep to be considered. However, I stood looking out, busily turning over in mind every conceivable plan of escape. But the ground lay far below, and the wall promised no foothold; nor had it developed any miraculous excrescences for my special behoof. I turned away, and examined the wardrobe, the sudden idea coming to me that perhaps Abou might have left his curious key in the door. But there was no such luck in store for me. The door was locked, and I had no means of opening it. Again I tried the bedroom door; but it remained sulkily closed against me. Miracles refused to come to my rescue.

Being at a loss I stood in the middle of the room staring forlornly about me, and again made my useless round from the window to the wardrobe, and from the wardrobe to the door. There seemed no way of escape. The only thing to do was to hide and wait. And the only place to hide in was the wardrobe. Still, it would be time enough to hide when I heard anyone

coming. Meanwhile I must continue to worry at the problem of how to escape. Again the same old round; and again without profit.

Then I had an illuminating idea. If I couldn't climb down the wall perhaps I could climb up. I ran to the window and looked towards the roof, and there dangling above me and a little to one side was my rope. I nearly shouted with triumph, and jumping to the sill reached for it and seized it; but it wouldn't come away. I tugged harder, but though it seemed to give a little, almost precipitating me off the ledge, it refused to yield. And all this while I knew I was exposing myself to anyone who might be looking up from the garden. I scanned

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the ground below, but could see no one, so again gave my attention to the rope. It seemed fixed more firmly than ever. I jumped back into the room and blew on my hands to cool them, for they were getting sore; and then it occurred to me that after all my intention had been to climb up, not down, and there was the rope ready for me. So again I sprang to the sill, and taking a firm grip of the rope swung out into the open, and still spinning round and round started to climb for the eaves. With the memory of my earlier climb in mind, also with the vision of the rope caught merely in a broken slate, and not understanding in the least how it could hold so tightly to such a support, I was in a frenzy of anxiety till breathless with haste I touched and seized the jutting eaves, and swung myself up to safety on the roof, where I lay panting, hardly able to realize my deliverance.

When I had recovered breath and composure I examined the slate where the hook had caught. I must have kicked my foot through when scrambling up the roof, for the hook had gone deeply in and was firmly gripping a rafter beneath. So firmly indeed that it was no easy matter to release it. However, after wrenching away at it for a few minutes with all my might I managed to work it free; and with very little bother I climbed back the way I had come earlier in the day, and soon found myself on firm earth once more, and with freedom well in sight.

I was winding the rope about me when it occurred to me that I hadn't yet finished my explorations. So choosing a hiding place among the ruins I deposited my rope and lantern there, and turned to go back to school. Cautiously I peeped round the corner to see if the road were clear; and behind me I heard a voice, "The devil! And who are you?"

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CHAPTER XIV

THE NEW TENANT

I WAS too frightened even to turn about, and stood petrified to the spot. I felt I must have been seen and followed, and something of the fear a trapped spy must experience laid hold of me. I was too terrified to think; my faculties were numb and useless.

The question was repeated:

“Who are you?”

The answer came from my mouth as though it was the only one possible.

“Tommy,” I said simply; and slowly turned and looked upon the questioner.

“Ho, you’re Tommy, are you?” he cried almost jovially. I saw a face of angry suspicion smooth itself out to one of merry kindness; and instinctively I smiled my broadest.

“So you’re Tommy, eh?” repeated the man, whom somehow I immediately knew to be Abou’s master; perhaps by his voice, but rather as I think because of a lurking shadow of uneasiness in his kindly grey eyes. I had seen just such a look on my father’s face when danger was imminent. It was the look of the hunted which I knew so well. And I knew this man was in hiding from some inveterate foe; he too lived with an enemy ever on his trail.

For a moment we stood facing each other, for my part still smiling, and growing reassured as the merry lines about his eyes puckered and wrinkled with amusement. It seemed as

though somehow I had found favour with him, for a child is quick to read the signs of affection in a stranger. And I know I felt a glow of heart as though I had stumbled on a friend; for his face was one of the kindest I had seen, and the lurking sadness, and something haunting and elusive in the whole expression, appealed to my sense of the romantic and mysterious. For already I knew there was a sorrow and a mystery in the life of this new friend of mine, and his face bore witness to the shadow amidst the sunshine. It was the kind of face I would have given to some favourite sea-

captain of my imagination; a face to love and yet to fear a little, with that kind of fear which is a delight, for it carries with it a sense of trust and reverence; and a face to wonder at and brood upon, for it was eloquent of old adventures and far sojournings and strange and secret things.

What prompted me to speak as I did, I can't say. I think something of my father's power of acting was born in me, for more than once in my life I have found myself playing a part with such ease and naturalness as for a while to have deceived even myself. And now I suddenly reverted to a simple, confiding, unsuspecting child, though half wondering what made me assume such a mask.

"Everybody calls me Tommy," I said. "And I go to school at Rancey Bridge, 'way yonder, but I hate it, because they won't let me play when I want to, and they've taken away my knife. But"—and here I looked cautiously round, and slowly drawing my pistol held it out to the stranger, saying—"but they don't know I've got this."

He chuckled merrily, and taking the pistol turned it over in his hands, while I watched him. He seemed to be hiding something behind his smile, something I couldn't quite read.

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I held out my hand and said, "I want it back, please;" and he gave it me, asking, "And do you know how to use it, my little man?"

"See," I said, raising it and taking aim, "I can hit that ousel."

"No," he cried quickly, "no. Poor thing!"

"Poor thing?" I said enquiringly.

"Well, there," he passed it over. "Put up your pistol; you may need it. I can see we're going to be great friends."

Again his eyes surveyed me twinklingly.

I continued with my chatter: "I should like you to be my friend. I think you can tell me stories. I like stories."

"You like stories, eh?" he said.

"Exciting ones," I answered in an awed voice, "that make you feel *hrrrrrh!*" I shuddered to express my meaning, and he laughed aloud.

"Ghost stories?" he asked.

"I've seen a ghost," I replied very quietly.

"The devil you have!" he cried.

"I tell you, yes," I went on, with something of my father's tense expression in my voice. "I've seen a ghost. Here. This house is haunted.

You like ghosts too, that you've come to live here?"

I put the question with a simplicity that surprised myself; for by now I knew I was acting a part, and yet couldn't bring myself to speak naturally. A constraint was upon me to carry on the play. I think the old man was delighted, for he broke out into a great peal of laughter, such as I associated with my imaginary type of jolly sea-captain, and exclaimed, "Like ghosts, eh? Well, they're not exactly friends of mine. Though I suppose we shall all be ghosts some day, eh?"

"Yes," I said in a hushed voice, "all ghosts some day."

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I was appalled at the change in his face. All the merriment died out of it, and his eyes became bright and piercing. "What do you mean, eh? What do you mean?" he cried, gripping me by the arm.

I was alarmed at this sudden transformation, for the shadow which I had seen lurking like a little speck in the corner of his eyes seemed to have overspread his whole countenance. There was something, too, of that awful imbecile look I had seen that night on my father's face when he had told me the story of the Mad Captain.

I stood looking stupidly up at him, and presently he relaxed his hold, and with a sigh drew his arm across his face as though to brush away the pain that had so suddenly overshadowed it.

I said, "I think you've seen a ghost too."

It was an unfortunate speech, for the frenzy surged back to his countenance, and his eyes blazed savagely at me. Again he caught me in his hands, and his whole body was quivering. "Ghosts!" he cried. "Ghosts! Ah, don't you ever speak of ghosts. They wake you in the dark, and you open your eyes, and they are staring at you, staring. ... And they die away with a moan, till the blood runs cold about your heart. And your throat is dry, and you can't speak. And your limbs are stiff, and won't move. ... Ghosts! ..."

"Yes," I said, "I know."

"You know?" he shouted; and laughed foolishly.

"I've seen. Here. This house is haunted. And I've heard them. They cry in the night, and sob bitterly, and call to you, till you want to go to them; but they only lead you on and on and trap you somewhere, or drown you in the river, or take you to the quarry where you'd fall and kill yourself."

"You've heard them, eh?" he said.

“Yes, at night-time; when the wind is out; and sometimes when it’s still. It sounds very sad as though some one is lost or dying or is looking for a friend. It hurts you to listen.”

Again he released me, and wiped his brow; and growing calmer said, “So then, if you heard crying here you’d know it was a ghost?”

“Yes,” I answered; “everybody’d know that.”

“Ah!” I thought he seemed relieved. But he put another question to me, watching me intently for the answer; “And if you heard—heard me crying in the night, would you think it a ghost?”

“Know it,” I said positively, “that’s what they do, to lead you on. I’ve heard them, crying like something in pain; and once I followed; but——”

I paused, wondering whether I had said too much; but he urged me on. “Yes, yes,” he said eagerly.

“Ah, I don’t remember,” I said. “I was lost, and there was something terrible, and in the morning it was all gone.”

There was a pause, and then I said deliberately, as though imparting some piece of profound advice, “If you hear them crying to you, don’t go; don’t go.”

I nodded my head sagely, and once again I heard his merry burst of laughter, and his face cleared.

“Oh,” he cried, “we shall be famous friends, Tommy; famous friends.” He patted me affectionately on the head.

But I was busy thinking out the situation into which my confidences had led me. Why didn’t he ask me how I knew all this? He would guess I had lived here; and that might be dangerous. So I said, “I come here often. I run away from school, you see, because I don’t like it. And then I hear things: and sometimes at night I see a shadow, and feel things breathing

on me; very soft, you know, as though a butterfly passed. I don’t know whether I like it or whether I’m afraid. It’s— it’s funny,” I finished feebly.

He was gazing at me with increased amusement. “So,” he said, “you run away from school, do you? Well, how’d you like to come and live here, eh?”

“Yes,” I said, “thank you,” as though the matter were settled.

That seemed to amuse him more than anything I had yet said, and he chuckled more delightedly than ever.

“Very well,” he said, “we’ll see about it. Rancey Bridge, you say? Well, I’ll be round in a few days, and we’ll see about it.”

“Not to-night?” I asked.

“To-night, eh?” he laughed. “You want to come tonight, eh?”

My thought was that I ought to have been back at school long before now, and there was a certain punishment in store for me. If I could accept the invitation straight away I might avoid unpleasant consequences.

My answer was too subtle even for me to follow its drift.

“You see, I like you,” I said.

And then I heard a halloo, and a high voice crying, “Daddy, daddy!”

The familiar word sent a gush of memory to my heart, and my eyes moistened. But the pain passed as quickly as it came, for a little girl came racing round the corner and drew up wide-eyed and motionless a foot in front of me.

“Why, Jenny!” exclaimed her father.

But she took no notice of him, her gaze fixed on me.

CHAPTER XV

JENNY

GIRLS were creatures outside my circle of experience. Indeed, so little did I know of them that I wasn't even bashful at this sudden apparition. I returned stare for stare, taking very precise notice of the little figure before me. The round dark eyes, the disordered locks, the curving lips, full and red, the slightly tilted nose, the freckles about the brow, all spoke of qualities I could well appreciate. Here was a spirit to match my own, if the signs weren't false. Here was a courage, a wildness, a passion. And that ringing cry of "Daddy, daddy!" awoke echoes in my own heart. I knew at once that I had found a companion; nor did I share that contempt for girls which I have since found is so usual with boys, perhaps because I was ignorant of the tactics of sisters so well calculated to move brothers to disgust and misappreciation of the whole sex. Indeed I hardly said to myself: This is a girl. All I thought was: Here is a companion; we shall be able to play together. And her name was Jenny. I moved my lips as though to speak it. I thought I liked it. It was a name one could shout or whisper. It had a familiar, everyday sound; yet wasn't weak or faded or colourless.

She turned suddenly away from me, and I found myself wiping my hand across my lips. She looked up at her father and said, "You've brought him, daddy? He's for me?"

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At that I opened my eyes, and her father laughed.

Jenny turned to me and said, "Daddy told me you would come soon. You're to play with me." Then she added, "I like you."

All this was a puzzle to me, and I looked to her father for some explanation; but he was still chuckling with amusement. It was Jenny who gave me a clue to the mystery.

"I haven't got a brother," she said. "I want you to play with me. Daddy promised."

"We'll play hide-and-seek," I answered.

"I'll go and hide," she cried, darting away. But she came racing back to ask my name.

"Tommy," I said.

“Tommy,” she repeated, as though asking herself whether it would do. “Yes,” she nodded, as it might be in approval, and was off again.

I turned my face to the wall and began to count. I heard Jenny’s father move away.

“Sir,” I cried, “how many?”

“How many?” he repeated.

“How many must I count,” I explained.

“Never mind how many,” he answered with a little laugh, “but mind you catch her.”

“Oh, I’ll catch her,” I asserted confidently.

“Don’t you be too sure,” he said, still amused at some jest which escaped me. “She’s slippery.”

“I’ll hold her tight,” I declared.

At that he went, still chuckling a little to himself; and I started on my quest, little realizing the significance of that first step in the pursuit of Jenny.

I can’t tell you all the turns of the game, but I found Jenny worthy of my mettle. She was a wild little thing, and rather

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than be caught would race away like a whisk of wind, and I would see her perched on some dizzy edge of ruin where my weight wouldn’t allow me to follow. Then she would laugh in shrill delight, and seeing me baffled would come lightly slipping down to me and say, “You were beaten? Say yes.”

But I would say no, not considering her manœuvre strictly fair.

Then she would stamp her foot and cry, “But you were beaten. You *must* say yes.”

“Yes, then,” I would mumble.

But this wouldn’t satisfy her. My submission must be whole-hearted. Arid when at length she had wrung a full surrender from me she would throw her arms round my neck and eagerly kiss me. And looking back now I can’t understand my reluctance to own defeat knowing the reward that awaited my acknowledgment.

Still the sweetness of the kiss didn’t efface the bitterness of being beaten at my own game. So once when I saw her daintily stealing out along a narrow and crumbling wall I decided I wouldn’t yield so easily. I climbed along after her, and although I felt the whole thing sway beneath me, and here and there a loosened stone slipped from under my knees and rattled to

the ground, I persisted; till even Jenny began to grow alarmed, and cried to me not to come any farther.

I stopped and delivered my ultimatum: "Then own you're beaten."

"No, no, *no*," she cried, almost in anger. So I advanced.

Three times she called to me to stop, but I was determined not to unless she acknowledged defeat. But she screamed her refusal at me, and I smiled, feeling the joy of revenge. She had already broken my will more than once making me confess to being vanquished; now it was my turn.

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The crazy wall still swayed beneath me, and Jenny crept out to the very last stone, which looked as though it might slip from under her at any moment. I pressed along the narrow edge towards her, and at last reaching out my hand would have touched her, but somehow she managed to draw away from me by yet another inch. I strained out; and something gave. I slipped and clutched; my eyes were full of dust; and there was a pain at my head. I found myself clinging to a crevice by my finger-tips, and above me I saw Jenny on her stone slowly slipping out from the wall. In a moment she would have fallen. I swung myself beneath her, and caught her in one arm: and then everything was dust and toppling stones, and a sudden jolt of all my body.

I scrambled out from the broken stuffs about me, and shook myself, glad to find my limbs undamaged; and Jenny who had fallen on top of me was saying, "Your head, Tommy; your head."

I put my hand up to my brow, realizing that everything was beginning to look dark about me. But Jenny had pulled out her kerchief and was dabbing at my forehead.

"I caught you," I said.

"Yes," she answered, still ministering to me.

"You own it," I pressed her.

"Yes," she again replied. And at that I repaid her in her own coin, putting my arms about her and kissing her.

She took it meekly enough, but said, "But you were, oh, so silly."

I laughed, but she continued, more gravely than I had yet heard her speak, "It'll always be there. Just under your hair. A big cut."

"Nothing," I said. And when the bleeding was staunch I suggested resuming the game. But Jenny looked about her

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and said it was growing dark, and suddenly added, "And I'm, oh, so hungry." She laid her hands shamelessly upon the empty member that was demanding nourishment, looking me straight in the eyes as though this was a serious matter.

"I'm hungry too," I said, suddenly realizing that my whole body was crying imperiously for food. So together we went into the house and found Jenny's father waiting for us, and some savoury soup steaming on the table.

We said not a word, but sat down in our places and lapped up the comforting broth with unctuous smackings, leaning back at the same moment with a profound sigh of relish....

Too soon came the hour of parting. As I said good-bye the vision of what awaited me at school began to take form in my mind.

"You'll come to-morrow," said Jenny.

But I knew that on the morrow I should be expiating the offence of to-day, so I answered rather sadly, "No, not tomorrow."

"But you must," she said.

"But I can't," I answered.

"Why not?" she demanded. But how could I tell her of the punishment that awaited me?

"I can't tell you," I said.

"You must tell me, you *must*!" she cried fiercely, stamping her foot.

"I can't, Jenny," I said again.

She looked at me a moment and asked, "Is it because I hurt you?"

"You didn't hurt me," I answered.

"Yes, I did," she declared, "and that's why you won't come."

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"No, you didn't," I contradicted her, "and that isn't why I won't come."

"Then why, Tommy?" she asked, with a sudden change to a soft coaxing tone.

"I can't tell you," was all I could say, feeling very stupid.

Again she stamped, and said, "Then I won't kiss you."

"I'm sorry," I said, and turned to go.

But she sprang after me and cried, "Oh, Tommy, *do* tell me.

At this I turned and fled, shouting, "I can't, I *can't*."

I ran down the path to the gate, and came face to face with Jenny's father. He had evidently been waiting for me. He caught me in his tight

grip, and looking sternly at me said, "Remember, it's the ghost that cries at night-time."

"Yes," I answered, "the ghost. I know. I've heard it."

"And seen it," he went on.

"And seen it," I admitted.

"Very well, very well," he patted me on the shoulder, and as I bade him good night and turned to go he added, "And if anyone wants to know who the new tenant is, remember it's Field: Captain Field."

"You *are* a captain?" I cried.

"How do you mean?" he demanded with a swift return to his fiercer manner.

"Why," I replied, "I like captains. You'll tell me stories."

"Stories! Ha, yes, stories enough for a lifetime," he ejaculated; and I ran on my way.

But I hadn't gone far before my run slackened to a walk, and then to a dawdle; for the prospect ahead of me wasn't alluring, and an idea was taking shape in my mind. If I returned and delivered myself up to authority I didn't know when I should be able to break from captivity again. And

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the thought of being separated from Jenny wasn't to be borne. I didn't remember having so thoroughly enjoyed myself since my father had left me. And then, too, there was the knowledge that she wanted me to return. She had dismissed me in anger because I hadn't promised to come back to her the next day. Well, somehow I must accomplish what I couldn't promise, and so appease her wrath.

I sat down by the road-side on a great pile of stones. I wanted to think. The obvious plan to follow was not to return to school. But where could I pass the night? Though spring was well on its way the night was a cold one, and I didn't relish the thought of spending it in the open. Perhaps I could return and find some corner in the ruin where I could at least shelter from the night air.

I looked back at the house. I hadn't left it far behind. A light was glowing faintly in a window facing me. I began to wonder which room that could be; and then I knew. On the other side was the room my father and I had used, and on this side I remembered was another large bedroom with a great four-post bed. It was a room I had climbed to, for the ivy grew thickly beneath it. I supposed Abou was sleeping there. Then suddenly I told

myself that Abou would be sleeping in my old room, for I knew Captain Field was in the secret room above, and somehow it seemed to me that Abou would be near him. From what I remembered of that calm and patient voice, Abou must be very necessary to his master with those strange sudden ways of his which already I had had a glimpse of.

Then who was sleeping in that room? Why, of course ...

But just then I heard some one coming along the road by the way I had already come. With my instinct for concealment I crept behind a pile of stones till he should pass; but I

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wasn't relieved to hear him make towards me and seat himself on the heap. I had had a glimpse of him as he approached through the dark. All I had seen was that he was carrying a short stout stick.

It was some little time before he rose again and moved on; and meanwhile I had heard shufflings and tuggings and whispered oaths as though some difficult or painful operation was in progress, but I didn't dare peer above the stones to investigate. But when at last the fellow got up to go I did peep after him, and was startled to see what had been a two-legged man hobble away with one leg transformed to a wooden stump below the knee. I rubbed my eyes and gazed after him as he melted into the night. But the change was no mere illusion. I could hear the *clop* of his wooden leg on the hard road.

For a while I sat there wondering what it could mean, till stories of impostors who feigned blindness and lameness came into my mind. I told myself it was some sham beggar, and turned my thoughts to my own case. Again I looked towards Sunset Towers; but the light had gone from the window. Only a looming black shadow shutting out a patch of the sky told me where the great mansion stood.

I got up slowly, and still uncertain what to do made my way back to the old house. Without thinking I wandered round to the side where I had seen the light, and found myself looking up at the window. And then I started to climb.

I was soon on the sill peering into the room, but couldn't distinguish anything through the blackness. I wondered whether I had better descend again before I was seen, but something held me there in spite of myself. And while I crouched I thought I heard a faint muffled cry echo through the

house, but though I strained my ears I didn't hear it again. Then it seemed to me that it must be terrible for Jenny to

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be alone there, with the sobs and moans I knew from of old haunting the night-time, startling one from sleep with a strange sense of unseen things flitting and hovering in the gloom. I tapped at the window, and said softly, "Jenny, Jenny!"

She didn't hear me. Perhaps she was asleep. I tapped again, and a third time. Then I drew back and nearly fell, for I suddenly became aware of a white figure on the other side of the glass with face pressed to the pane. I had never before seen anything quite so ghost-like. But I recovered myself immediately, for it was Jenny herself. I hadn't heard her noiseless passage across the room.

I spoke her name again.

She opened the window and let me in, shutting it behind me.

"Have you come to tell me why?" she asked.

"I've come to stay," I answered, adding rather paradoxically, "If I don't go away I can come back."

She didn't notice the paradox, but took my meaning.

"Yes," she said; and then, "It's cold." She slipped back into the great bed, where I could dimly see her little figure like a tiny mound in a wide plain.

I jumped on to the bed and lay at her feet. "I'll stay here," I said. She sat up and turned down the coverlet, telling me to wrap it round me.

I curled myself into it, pulling it up tight under my chin, and soon began to glow warmly.

And then again I heard that cry. It wasn't like the cries I had heard before. It was wilder and more ringing, not so sad and plaintive.

Jenny asked, "Did you hear that?"

"It's the wind," I answered.

"There's no wind," she said.

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I lay and said nothing, not wishing to frighten her with stories of ghosts. Presently I heard her call me: "Tommy!"

"Yes," I answered.

"I think it's daddy."

“No,” I contradicted her with emphasis.

“I think it is.”

“Jenny it’s—it’s a ghost,” I declared, remembering my instructions.

“No, it’s daddy,” she asserted again. “I’ve often heard him. There’s a bad man who comes and frightens him; then he shouts like that.”

I sent out a flying thought to Dirk and his vow of vengeance. Could it be possible that Jenny’s father was the King’s Man?

“Jenny,” I said, “I tell you it’s a ghost. I’ve heard it before. I’ve seen it.” And to take her mind from her father I told her a jumbled-up story, part true, part imaginary, of how once I thought I had heard my friend calling to me in the night, and had risen, and had been led I knew not where, and had found a skeleton in the darkness; and it was the ghost of the skeleton that had been calling me all the time. I ended: “They call as though it’s somebody you know. Then you want to get up and go to them, and then they catch you.”

Jenny lay quiet for a minute, then said, “Tommy, that’s a lovely story. Tell me another.”

I was immensely relieved to realize that she didn’t believe me, for as I finished the tale it came to me with a flash of fear that she might want to know how it was I had ever lived in the house.

“To-morrow,” I answered her, for I was weary.

I expected her to insist in her imperious way on another

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recital then and there, but she said, “I’m tired, Tommy. Good night.”

“Good night,” I returned, and was soon asleep.

I awoke early, and crept out of my cover. Jenny was still sleeping. I threw her a look; then crossed to the window, and climbed down.

When I arrived on the scene for breakfast the Captain was somewhat surprised to see me. “Back again?” he cried.

I looked at Jenny and answered, “I’m not going to school any more.”

The Captain laughed uproariously; but Jenny said, “You’ll stay at school with me. Daddy’ll teach us.”

I thought then that school had prospects of interest for a boy.

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CHAPTER XVI

ABOU

FOR a few days I was so happy that I believe I had even forgotten my father. The Captain was immensely amused at the decided way in which I had established myself as one of the household, and when I told him I had no intention of returning to Rancey Bridge he chuckled delightedly to himself as though at some secret joke, and then in a whisper confided to me that he too had run away from school, nodding his head at me and winking shrewdly.

But I wasn't allowed unlimited freedom, for Jenny and I had to sit at a table for a couple of hours every morning reading and writing, or listening to the Captain's instructions in geography or history, or whatever it was that he happened to pitch on. And when the big hand of the clock drew round to the second hour we weren't too eager to run away, for the Captain's teaching was more like story-telling than the kind of stuff I had been used to at Rancey Bridge. I think it was effective enough in its own way; for though I wasn't his pupil for very long, yet in those few days I began to get a definite picture of the course of English history and the ways of the world beyond the seas. With a longer course I dare say I should have grown wise enough in matters of international trade, and the bearing of geographical conditions on the life of the world; for these were the Captain's favourite themes.

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Still, interesting as I found all this, when once free of the class-room and out among the ruins with Jenny I didn't give much thought to what I had learnt. My whole soul was absorbed in play. And pretending to be investigating, rather than guiding, I took Jenny to every nook and corner of the old place, except indeed into the secret passage; for as a matter of fact I hadn't yet learnt how to open the door, though remembering Abou's long key I could guess that one of the little holes in the pitted surface of the wall was the entrance to the lock. All this, I say, had to be done as though everything were a fresh discovery to me, for I knew I mustn't let Jenny or her father know that I had lived there before. Anything which might conceivably involve my father had to be avoided, though I didn't imagine

for one minute that the Captain's fate and my father's were in any manner interwoven; except indeed that they both seemed to be under the shadow of an invisible foe, and sometimes I wondered whether it was the same enemy that was pursuing them so ruthlessly.

I soon found that Jenny had a fierce little heart; indeed I had discovered that on the first afternoon. But the days I now spent with her revealed her to me more and more vividly. Her fierceness was of a type that I appreciated and even admired. She never sulked when she couldn't have her own way. Her anger was the anger of an antagonist, not of a spoilt darling. We played our games indeed as though our whole strength and cunning were pitted against each other. We didn't play for the mere fun of the thing, but to win; and neither gave nor expected quarter. This was the sort of play I relished. There was a sting and a fervour in it that so far I had never known; for my father of course had always outmatched me, and if ever I outwitted him it seemed as a sort of concession to my weakness. But now we were both on

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our mettle; and the evenings found us weary to exhaustion with the exertions of our unending struggle.

It was during one of these games that I suddenly came across Worthing. He caught a flying glimpse of me as I was diving for shelter into a bush, and called severely, "Tommy, come here."

"Hush!" I whispered, creeping out.

"I want to speak to you," he went on sharply.

"Go to the haunted room," I said, and slipped away, making a circuit to avoid Jenny who was stalking me.

At length I reached the haunted room, and found Worthing awaiting me. I remembered then that I hadn't given a thought to my friend all these days. "Worthing!" I cried, and would have taken his hands in mine, but he clasped them firmly behind his back.

"What sort of a little fool do you think you're making of yourself?" he asked me coldly.

I explained rather confusedly that I had left school.

"That story won't do for the officers," he replied.

"The officers?" I questioned blankly.

"They're after you. You might have guessed that. And you know the penalty of running away."

"I know most of the penalties," I replied with unusual bitterness for me.

“Well, then, you’d better come back quickly,” he said.

“They’ll need wild horses to get me there,” I declared.

For a while he surveyed me pityingly, then turned on his heel and made for the door, saying, “Well, I give you up.”

“Worthing,” I cried, catching him by the arm, “don’t go like this.”

He merely swung round and faced me.

“Look here,” I went on, “you’re my friend, aren’t you?”

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Well, come and live here with me. It’s simply splendid, I tell you.”

He gave a short little laugh, and said, “Thanks; no.” And again he was going. But at the door he turned, and in a more relenting tone added, “Tommy, your heart’s in the right place, but it’s too big; and there’s no room for brains.”

And just then Jenny came leaping into the room, and collided with him full tilt.

He fell back a step and looked at her, while for her part she stood motionless gazing at him, much as she had done at her first meeting with me.

“Jenny, this is Worthing,” I said.

“Worthing?” she enquired.

“He’s my friend, Worthing Bright,” I explained.

“I don’t like him,” she said.

Worthing stood silent, and I couldn’t read what was passing in his mind; but he looked stiff and scornful. I was troubled, and said, “But you must like him, Jenny; he’s my friend.”

“I won’t like him,” she declared with emphasis.

“But, Jenny!” I protested.

Worthing cut in coldly, “I don’t see the need at all.” And turning to Jenny he went on, “If you don’t like me, perhaps you may learn to fear me.”

“If I could fear you,” she answered defiantly, “I should like you too.”

They gazed fiercely at each other, and I stood helpless; for I seemed to be between two elemental forces. Their eyes were electric in their intensity of antagonism. The combat passed beyond me. My nature was too lax and mild for such a strain of hate.

Then Worthing turned to me, and his words cut me like a

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bitter wind. "So, Tommy!" he said. "Already! ... These creatures lure us from our duty soon enough. It's to be expected. But already! ... I can't even wish you joy."

Now all this was an enigma to me, but the tone of his voice and the look of his eyes were worse than a whip.

"Worthing!" I exclaimed, conscious that somehow I had roused his scorn as well as his anger. "What is it? Why will you quarrel with me like this? I want to be friends."

"You'd better keep your Jenny," he threw at me; and was gone.

We were left alone.

Jenny said emphatically, "That boy hates me. He wants to take you from me. But I won't let you go."

"Of course not," I said mazedly.

We were soon back at our game; but for a time my heart was heavy. I couldn't understand Worthing's bitter rebuke. After all he was three years my senior, he had been to London; he had had some experience of the world and the world's literature beyond the romantic diet I had been fed on.

I must have played with only half my heart, for Jenny frequently chided me, and at last ran off in a huff declaring I wanted to leave her and join my friend. She stressed the word contemptuously, and told me to go. I was troubled, for this was the first real quarrel we had had. Other tiffs had merely been incident to the antagonism of our games. I followed her, but she would have none of me, and locked herself in her room. I sat down moodily and wondered what to do. For a while I felt angry at her unreasonableness, and once rose half intending to obey her and return to school. But the knowledge that if I did so I should be saying good-bye to Sunset Towers for many a long day came as a check to my

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peevish anger. Moreover, I half expected to receive a message from my father; for the first signs of summer were on the trees, and summer without a spell at the *Dolphin* was unthinkable. So I mustn't get myself imprisoned at Rancey Bridge. Now above all times freedom was essential. The thought that if my father did reappear and signal for me there would be a stormy parting from Jenny gave me a momentary pang, But I dismissed it as an unwelcome consideration.

Presently I was aware of some one approaching, and looking up saw Abou standing above me. This was almost the first time I had seen him

since that first eventful afternoon; and it was certainly the first time I had seen him so close at hand. Occasionally I caught a fleeting glimpse of him moving like a shadow about the house, but usually he was nowhere to be seen, and I thought of him cloistered in the secret room ministering to the strange malady of the Captain. He wasn't needed to attend our table at meals, for a woman came from the village each day to do the necessary cooking and cleaning.

He stood quietly before me, waiting, it seemed, for me to speak. But as I hadn't sent for him and didn't know in the least what he wanted, I remained silent, looking at him.

His face seemed wonderfully peaceful. His eyes indeed were like deep pools, very still and quiet. But little of his features could be seen because of his huge black beard and whiskers. I noticed he was dusky, and wondered of what nationality he was; but I couldn't decide. There was something Eastern in his hovering deference, still waiting for me to speak; but I couldn't think he was Indian, nor Malay, and certainly not Chinese.

At last I said, "Well, Abou?"

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That was all he needed. I suppose it wouldn't have been respectful had he spoken before being addressed.

"Miss Jenny sent me," he said in that wonderful soft voice I had heard once before. "She say, Master Tommy may speak with her if he wish." There was more than a suggestion of a foreign accent in his words, but he seemed to have mastered the language exceptionally well.

"Oh, thank you, Abou," I cried, springing up; and would have been off. But he said, "Master Tommy, big boy must forgive little girl. She very sorry, I think; but she not say so. Master Tommy will forgive her, yes?"

"Oh, yes, Abou, yes," I called out to him as I ran off.

And that was not the only time his mediation was of use to us. For sometimes it was my turn to hunt him out and send him on an embassy of reconciliation to Jenny; and always he would tell me in his gentle way, till at last the words began to sink into my heart like a memory, "Big boy forgive little girl, Master Tommy," or "How silly, now, when all should be happy, to say unkind thing." Indeed Abou filled a unique corner in my heart, and I loved the strange mysterious peacemaker whose voice was so kind and soothing; and I thought I understood how it was that the Captain

found him of comfort in the dark moods that occasionally swooped down upon him.

For I soon found I had fallen into a strange family. The Captain was as kind to me as my own father, and I could see his affection glow from his eyes as they rested broodingly upon me, though always there was that little twinkle of amusement playing about them even at their solemnest. Yet I never felt quite at ease, for again and again I saw the shadow creep up, and thought the storm would sweep over him; and I knew that only a terrible power of will was restraining him from yielding to some mad frenzy of fancy such as I had

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witnessed at our first meeting. Then, too, there was the crying I heard at night, when it seemed to me that the frenzy was too strong for him. There was a fear at his heart. And I couldn't help comparing him with my father, who also, with a fear at his heart, always faced it with a smile. But one man's courage is not another's, as I had seen put to the proof in the case of Worthing and myself.

If it hadn't been for the Captain's insistence that the crying by night wasn't of this earth, and Jenny's contrary declarations that it was her father's voice we could hear echoing so piteously through the building, though I noticed she never let fall a word to that effect before her father, if it hadn't been for these hints I might have been deceived into thinking it merely the old wailing I had been used to hearing, and which now in my wisdom I ascribed entirely to the wind in the secret passage when the door was open. For in that twisting corridor the least breath could play like the note of an organ.

But once the madness did break out. It was one evening when the wind had risen more tempestuously than usual. I was kneeling in front of the fire telling Jenny a story, or rather weaving into a disconnected tale the wailing and sobbing of the wind as it hung in lingering eddies about odd corners of the ruined dwelling. Each gust that came racing over the moors was another voice from the world of spirits, and I interpreted its message of woe and lamentation much as my father had used to do. "Hark now!" I said, "that's a soldier. He was killed in battle shouting out his war-cry. And there! that's a hunter. Hear him; 'Hallooo! Hallooo!' And there's a mother calling to her baby. They stole it from her, and she heard it sobbing, sobbing, because it

wanted her. And she reached her hands out for it, but they thrust her away. You hear her crying: ‘Awaay! Awaay!’

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And, ah! listen! Two, three, four, five; all howling together. They’re chasing some one. Listen! On, on, on! He’s crying for mercy. Their hands are at his throat. He feels their breath behind him. And how they’re laughing: ‘Ahaa! Ahaa!’ ... Oh, Jenny! ...”

I broke off, for at that moment, as though the clamouring wind had burst into the very room, there was a fearful howl of insane laughter, and the Captain sprang at me and seized me about the throat, shaking me like a rat.

“Laughing, are they?” he shouted frenziedly. “Laughing! Ahaa! And they’ve caught him, have they? Yes, by God, caught him!” And with that he flung me away from him, crouching back from me like an animal preparing to spring.

I was terrified, and half choked. As I looked at his blazing eyes I felt a cold horror at my heart, for his face was distorted into a frightful grimace of imbecile hatred and fury. I picked myself up slowly, for I feared a quick movement would bring him upon me. But he still crouched menacingly, and I could see his body quivering with insane malice. I felt about in my mind for some way of escape. The window? The door? But suddenly he was at me, and I sprang away behind the table. There followed a terrible chase, round and round, and my nimbleness stood me in good stead; for three times he was foiled as I swung a chair in his path, and he crashed to the floor, sprawling, and hissing out threats and curses. But I couldn’t get to the window or the door. He was cunning enough to guard my escape, and I began to wonder how the chase would end.

Again he crouched away from me, with the table between us, while I kept my eyes fixed steadily on his. He was jabbering to himself like an angry ape, but with a menace too terrifying

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to describe. Then with a bound he cleared the table, and only my quickness in dropping flat to the floor saved me from his clutch. With a scramble I was under the table, and again facing him across it. But he lay moaning to himself, holding his head, and I felt a sudden pity swell up in my heart. He must have hurt himself, and foolishly enough I wanted to comfort him. I

took a step or two round the table, and yet he lay still. I advanced but he made no movement. "Sir," I said, "it's only me. It's Tommy."

"Tommy? Tommy?" he repeated vacantly; then suddenly broke out with a sob, "Oh, forgive me, Tommy!"

With that I ran boldly up to him and knelt down beside him, but with a hideous cackle he gripped me by the shoulders, and I realized I had been duped. But I wasn't to be taken so. I remembered my pistol, and as my hands were free I drew it easily enough, and cried, "Let me go, Captain, or I'll shoot you."

I was amazed at the success of my manœuvre, for he fell back holding up his hands and gazing at me in horror.

I began to retreat to the door, but just then it opened, and Jenny, whom I hadn't missed till now, returned, and behind her Abou. He went straight to the Captain and said, "Come, my master," in that smooth voice of his which fell like a charm on the terrible scene. And like a lamb the Captain followed his servant from the room.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SIGN

I WAS left alone with Jenny, and found her glaring at me white with anger. I was startled and fell back from her, for it seemed for a moment as though her father's madness had descended upon her, and that I was to be whirled into another storm of frenzy. But as she gazed at me, her fierce eyes blazing, I soon came to realize that nothing worse than anger possessed her, and I wasn't long in learning the cause of it.

"You would kill my daddy," she said with sharp emphasis, still fixing me with her gaze.

"Jenny!" I answered weakly.

"Yes, you would shoot my daddy," she continued relentlessly, "you would shoot him: and he loves you."

What was I to say? I advanced towards her, but she stepped back, and said fiercely, "I hate you!"

I stood still, my mind in a maze. It seemed so utterly unreasonable. Surely she knew I had been in danger of my life? I began to stammer something to that effect, but she stamped her foot and cried, "I hate you, I hate you!"

"Then I shall shoot myself," I answered, holding the pistol at my heart.

She watched me without a word, and at last as I still delayed said, "Well, when?"

I think I was as near death at that moment as I have ever been, for a sudden rage welled up in my heart, a rage of self-pity

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at Jenny's unreasonable reproach, and my finger had tightened on the trigger; but whether I really heard it, or whether it was an idle illusion, I can't say, but from far away I thought I heard the faintest echo of a whistle, and I recognized a few notes of a sailor's chantey such as my father had used to sing. The pistol dropped to my side, and I stood listening. I hardly heard Jenny saying, "You see, you daren't." For the moment my mind was elsewhere; but the sound had gone.

I turned again to Jenny. "Good-bye," I said, and made towards the door.

“Tommy,” she cried after me in her imperious way, “where are you going?”

“Away,” I answered.

“Where?”

“A long way away. I shall never see you again.”

“Tommy!”

I was at the door, and had no intention of turning back, but the sudden change of tone from anger to tearful appeal swung me round against my will, and before I knew what I was doing I was at her side.

“What?” I asked.

“Are you going to leave me, Tommy?” she said; and her voice was gentle enough now.

I realized I had been fooled, and answered shortly; “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you hate me.” I couldn’t resist the retort.

“I don’t hate you,” she declared.

“You said you did,” I threw back, not meaning to be easily appeased, and itching, moreover, to be away after that summoning whistle.

“Only if you hate daddy,” she said.

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“He ...” I began in self-justification; but she wouldn’t listen.

“He loves you,” she cut in. “And it’s only the bad man who makes him like that.” Then she seemed fired by a sudden inspiration. “Tommy,” she cried, “you find the bad man.”

“Then I’ll kill him,” I declared easily.

“Promise?” she said, gazing up eagerly into my eyes.

“I’ll start now,” I answered, and walked out of the room. And as soon as I was out of the house I raced at full speed to where I thought I had heard the whistle. But though I searched for an hour or more, whistling odd snatches of melody which I knew my father would recognize if he were near, yet I saw no one, except indeed one immense fellow swinging up the shadowy road towards Rancey Bridge. But he was too huge to have been my father. I watched him pass on into the night; and then I thought I heard the whistling begin again. I listened, but it was merely the stranger who had just passed me. I felt a sinking of heart, for I thought I had been tricked by a mischievous spirit.

I walked back slowly to the great dark house, feeling lonely and miserable; for though I knew the Captain was fond of me, yet I never felt safe in his presence; and Jenny was stupidly unreasonable, blaming me for defending myself against a madman. I knew now that I wanted my father; for the sudden hope of seeing him again had been cruelly dashed, and my heart was left bleeding as though from a wound.

I crept upstairs to my room, a little chamber next to Jenny's which had been fitted up for me, intending to sleep till the first of the morning, and then to steal away from that accursed house and make tracks for the *Dolphin*. But Jenny had heard me return; and I heard my door opened, and her voice

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whispering to me through the dark, for I hadn't lit my candle: "Tommy, did you find him?"

"No," I said.

"But you will find him?"

"Yes."

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

I thought she had gone, but she had glided silently up to me where I lay on my bed still dressed; and I felt her lips pressed passionately to mine, murmuring, "There, I don't hate you, Tommy."

I was in no mood for kissing. Indeed these sudden whims of quarrelling and caressing, unaccountable hate melting into unaccountable tenderness, baffled me. It was perplexing; it savoured of madness. It seemed to me that the Captain's blood ran very freely in Jenny's veins. I was bewildered by her moods and transformations, and began to wish for the fresher atmosphere of my father's companionship.

I merely said, "Very well," and turned on my side.

She left me, and I thought I heard a faint whimper. What now, I wondered. But the handle turned and the latch clicked; she had gone.

I was away early, snatching a bite of breakfast in the larder, and stocking my pockets with morsels for the road, for I didn't know where or how I was to get my next meal. As I left the gate I should have turned south straight away, but I knew if I turned north for a hundred yards I should have another sight of Jenny's window. I didn't stop to ask myself why I should want another sight of Jenny's window. Perhaps I rather reproached myself for my

coldness to her the night before when she so evidently wanted to heal the wound she had dealt me. However that might be, the fact remains recorded against me

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that I yielded to the unreasoning prompting of my heart to throw a farewell kiss to her window before I started again on my travels, with our next meeting shrouded somewhere in the mists ahead.

I reached the heap of stones where I had hidden from the false-legged beggarman, and gazed back at the house. I could see Jenny's window, black among the ivied stone. But as I looked a white figure appeared there, and I knew it was Jenny. I sprang on to the pile of stones and waved my hands. She saw me, and waved in return. For a moment a strange unaccustomed thrill ran along my blood, and I thought I would go back to her for a warmer leave-taking. But she had gone; and at that moment I heard stealthy steps approach me. I looked round, to see the officers Worthing had warned me of. I sprang from the pile and ran, but there was a third who had cut off my retreat, and I was hopelessly trapped. My arms were tied behind me, and with threats and proddings I was marched away for Rancey Bridge.

The reverse from freedom to captivity was so sudden that I was numbed by it and couldn't think. It seemed like the kind of thing that happened in nightmares. I should awake soon and find it all an ugly fancy. But one consoling thought re-echoed through my mind: at least Jenny hadn't seen.

It was some time before my brain began to work again. So overwhelmed was I that the blow seemed final and irretrievable. I could see nothing beyond the cell they were haling me to, though that I could see clearly enough. And it wasn't the horror of the thing that appalled me; I could face that. The loneliness and the dark meant little to me. Rather it was the loss of my liberty that oppressed me. A moment before, and I was my own master; I was off for the *Dolphin* and the delights of a summer-time with my father, though I hadn't

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considered very deeply upon what foundations my hopes had been built. Still, here I was with nothing but the prospect of four walls about me, closing me in and shutting out the wonderful air of heaven and the sound and beauty of the sea.

I remember I experienced one pang of conscience, for a voice said that this was retribution for trying to deceive Jenny. I had left her, pretending to seek for her father's foe, when in reality I was merely bent on finding my own father, and having found him I should in all probability have forgotten Jenny and her mission. + But little by little my spirit revived, and I told myself they couldn't imprison me for ever; and once free of the cells I should know well enough how to make my escape from Rancey Bridge.

We were in the village at last. There was a crowd in the street blocking up the way so that one of the officers had to push ahead to clear a passage. If my wits had been clearer I should have asked myself what could have called a crowd together at this time of the morning; for it was early, though the sun had risen. Then some one called "Hullo, Tommy!" and I saw the faces of my schoolmates about me. Of course they had been out for their morning run. I told myself that the morning run would be a good time to make my next escape. But they had stopped in their run; something had caught their attention. I heard laughter, and peering into the heart of the throng saw by glimpses a beggarman who seemed to be yarning volubly to an admiring mob. There were three rows of military decorations across his breast. An old soldier, I thought. Then he moved forward a step, and I caught the *clop* of a wooden leg. I glanced swiftly, and recognized the one-legged impostor I had seen at his trickery.

So, I thought, a rogue like that may enjoy his liberty, while

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every one thinks him a hero, but I must go on my way to a cell! I don't remember having felt so bitterly in my life before. Nor was my sense of injustice appeased when he caught my eye and slowly winked at me, as though realizing full well that our places should have been reversed.

All this took but a moment's time, and the officers having cleared a path jerked me forward. I lost sight of the old humbug. But suddenly he started singing, and his words sent the blood leaping to my heart:

"'Twas at Ebb-Tide Cave by the Smugglers' Gate,
At the dawn of a summer's day;
And there those happy lovers met,
All on the first of May."

I heard him cry merrily, “Would you like to hear the story of that, m’lads?” and the boys shouted for the narrative. I turned my face away so that no one should see my sudden emotion, but only to meet the eyes of Worthing watching me intently, while the old soldier’s voice still echoed the refrain, for my benefit I knew:

“All on the first of May,
My dear,
All on the first of May.”

Worthing’s face showed no sign of comprehension; but I knew that he knew.

I began wondering what the date might be, but had no notion, except that it must be well on in April. The first of May! How could I be at Ebb-Tide Cave by the first of May?

The full meaning of my calamity was borne in upon me as by a great wave. The gripping hands of the officers seemed like chains of adamant about my arms, relentless and unbreakable.

CHAPTER XVIII

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN

I DON'T wish to dwell on the suffering and despair of the next few days. The mere physical distress was bad enough, but looking back I hardly seem to remember the daily flogging, nor the cold and damp of the bare brick cell, nor my stiffness of body when I awoke in the dark not knowing whether it were morning yet or still night-time, nor the hunger gnawing within me, half famished as I was on the starvation diet. These things have only left a blurred impression on my memory, though the anguish at the time was cruel enough. But what I do remember vividly, as though the agony of it were still with me, is the crying pain at my heart, knowing my father wanted me, had sent for me, and like a fool I wasn't ready for him, had indeed by my imbecile conduct failed him at his need. This was the thought that stung me more than the birch and the shivering cold and the biting hunger: my father needed me, and I had failed him.

How long I was kept in captivity I didn't reckon up. It seemed endless, and with no hope of freedom beyond. When Staggers brought me my first meal I did indeed ask him how many days there were to May-day, but he merely snarled at me, and kicked me where I lay with the chains about my wrists. For by now I was considered dangerous. Some while since I had been deprived of my knife, and of course when I was stripped for flogging my pistol was found on me. One who

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could run away from school and hide a week or more in the neighbourhood without discovery, and who, moreover, was found at last with a loaded pistol beneath his cloak, wasn't to be treated as an ordinary mischief-maker. Though locked and bolted into my cell it was deemed necessary to chain me up also.

Repeatedly I was bidden to declare where I had been hiding, but my courage was firm enough to prevent me from betraying the Captain. It seemed a mystery to my captors where I could have obtained food and shelter all this while. Eventually it was assumed that I had robbed at the pistol mouth; and had there been any robberies during my absence doubtless I should have been held responsible for them. However, though

no robberies could be discovered, I was well flogged on the understanding that they had nevertheless been committed. For otherwise how had I supported myself?

But all this I wish to pass over. It was miserable while it lasted, and it helped to harden something within me which was gradually taking stock of the ways of the world, appraising them of condemning them according to my own sense of the just and the fitting without reference to the standards I found set-up about me.

It was one evening, as I knew, not by the darkness about me, for it was always dark, but by the fact that some time since I had had my second meal, when the door of my cell opened, and the clatter of a mug on the brick floor told me that my last meal for the day had come. I didn't move, for hungry as I was the mouldy crust and water didn't rouse my appetite. But I was surprised at the unaccustomed striking of a light. So used had I grown to the darkness that I couldn't keep my eyes open, but screwed them up painfully against the dazzling glare. But little by little blinking them open again, at last I could just

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bear to look about me. I saw Worthing holding up a lantern, and gazing down at me.

I was more surprised than I could express. I couldn't even utter his name, but lay there gaping stupidly, and wondering if it were merely a vision.

Presently he spoke, coldly I thought, but deliberately, as though each word was of importance.

"If you have quite recovered yourself," he said, "just listen to me. You haven't too much time. First here's a file for those chains. You must work the thing yourself as well as you can. Then here are your knife and pistol. I shall leave the door unlocked. I think you'll know what to do. Goodbye."

He was going; but I gasped out his name, and he turned.

"Well?" he asked.

"But tell me," I said, "what does it mean?"

"No time," he replied.

"But you must, you *must*" I implored.

He was silent a minute or two as though wondering how best to explain the mystery. Then he said icily, "It's pretty simple, Tommy. It means just this, that I'm a thief and a liar." And again he was at the door.

But I broke out, struggling at my chains, "Oh, Worthing, my best friend, don't go like this. You've done something terrible for me. What is it? What is it?"

"Why," he answered in the same bitter tone, "I've broken my trust, that's all. The Doctor trusted me, and I stole your knife and pistol. Staggers trusted me, because he wanted the evening out, and I've brought you a file and unlocked the door. Good-bye."

"Worthing!" I called after him.

"For God's sake don't shout like that," he cut in.

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"Look here," I said more calmly, "you must forgive me. I called you a coward. I didn't mean it."

"And I called you a fool, and I did mean it," he said shortly, and was gone. He came back to say, "You have just a week," and left me.

For a moment I lay motionless, wondering whether I ought to take advantage of the liberty he had brought me. But I knew it was too late now for such a scruple. If I had meant to refuse his gift I should have done so before I let him go. In fact I realized now there were many things I should have done before I let him go. If I couldn't have persuaded him to take back his gift, at least I should have pressed him to fly with me; for something of what lay in store for him when his deed was discovered I could faintly guess. But with a shrug I dismissed the thought. Since he had gone there was nothing left for me to do but to make the best use of the chance he had given me, for to fail now would but double his disgrace.

I set to work with the file, for my chains were long enough to permit of that. But the labour was tedious, and many times I rested almost exhausted with the ceaseless fretting, my fingers rubbed and bleeding and so tender that even to hold the tool was an agony. But I knew the work must be done, and at last crying with pain I had filed through the links, and rose to my feet sore and stiff, but free.

Very lovingly I handled my knife and pistol, and secreted them ready for use, for I was determined to fight my way through rather, than be dragged to prison again. The door creaked and groaned as I slowly swung it open, having first put out the lantern lest its light should betray me. But the passage was deserted, and at the end was a narrow flight of stone steps up which I crept. At the top was a door which yielded to my pressure, for Worthing had left it unlocked, though the key was

in its place on the other side. As I passed through, in front of me a few paces away was a side door that gave on to the street. I was about to open it when I heard a heavy tread without, and the door opened in upon me. I flattened myself against the wall, and peeping round could just make out the figure of Staggars, unsteady from some late debauch, reeling through. He turned to close the door, drawing the key from the outside of the lock. I feared I should be discovered, in spite of the dark, for in his drunken state he might easily lay his hand upon me. Moreover, he would probably lock the door, if he could manage to fit the key into the hole, and then pocket the key; and escape would then be more precarious, as I would have to go by the front entrance where the doorkeeper might hear me.

Quickly I made up my mind what to do. I could see Staggars stupidly lurching as he fumbled at the lock. I jerked open the door behind me, and throwing my full weight upon Staggars sent him toppling backwards through the doorway and bundling down the stairs; and as his body thumped and tumbled below me, I flung to the door and locked it; then turned and escaped into the night.

For a while I fled as though in a panic; then finding myself clear of the village I rested to recover my breath. What was I to do? Where was I to go? Should I press straight on as far as I could? But I became aware of a tiredness and stiffness of my whole body. I had been starved and tortured, and would probably collapse if I tried to go far without food. So I decided to make for Sunset Towers. I could hide there for the next day while the hunt was out. The Captain wouldn't give me up ever; if enquiries were made for me there. So I set off again, so weary that even the few miles ahead seemed a year's journey. But the thought of Staggars locked for the night in his own prison brought me wonderful

consolation. I only hoped he wasn't too drunk to taste to the full the evil horrors of darkness.

I didn't realize till I rose again and started on my way how much I had had to endure during those few days in the cell. The short rest by the roadside left every muscle stiffened as though run into a mould and set. And with the friction of my clothes the wounds across my back were chafed into an agonizing tenderness, so that with stiffness and soreness every step was

a double torment. I was weak and exhausted too from want of food, and I yearned to lie down on the heath and rest again; but I dared not. I knew my stiffness would increase upon me tenfold, and I feared lest sleep should overtake me. And with that thought I hurried forwards, for I knew if I fell asleep I should be found by the officers, and I shuddered with naked terror at the possibility of being recaptured and haled back to torture. The new taste of freedom, with the prospect of the *Dolphin* and my father only a week's tramp away, set the dread of imprisonment in black relief, till the fear of it became a haunting terror at my heels to spur me forward in spite of aches and pains. So I stepped on as swiftly as I could, crying with the agony of the rough clothes against my raw back, for indeed they seemed like rasps grating at my very bones.

Before I reached Sunset Towers I was alarmed to see the east growing white with the morning. I hadn't realized what a time I had spent filing through my chains, nor indeed how laggingly I had crept the few miles from Rancey Bridge. For I was staggering now in a crazy zigzag, unconscious of everything except the goal before me and the need to reach it without delay.

At last I touched the gate, where for a moment I leant against the post swaying dizzily, then with an effort passed on again for the last few steps, instinctively making for Jenny's

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window. And there indeed my strength failed me. I fell to the earth clutching at the ivy, and calling with what voice I could summon, "Jenny, Jenny, come and let me in."

I sank on the ground and waited, so weary that almost with the uttering of my cry for help I would have been asleep. But Jenny had heard me. The window was flung up, and she called quietly down, "Tommy, is that you?"

"Jenny," I said, but couldn't speak another word.

Her instinct must have told her I was at my last gasp, for she didn't stay to question me. In a moment she was out of the house and at my side, and her firm little arms were about me helping me to stand, and leaning on her heavily I managed to totter in and collapsed on a chair in the dining-room beside the empty grate.

After this things passed in a maze for some while. Jenny must have brought me some food and wine, and somehow supported me up the stairs

to her room; for presently I found myself lying snugly in bed, and with the fading vision of her face bent above me sank into a wonderful sleep.

There was nothing more the matter with me than exhaustion, for when I awoke later in the day, though I still felt stiff and somewhat shaky about the head, yet I had lost the stupid sense of weakness which had sent me tottering down the road from Rancey Bridge. My strength had returned to me, and even the soreness had gone from my back. But putting my hand to the place I discovered why; it was swathed in comfortable bandages.

At the movement Jenny was at my side, and I put out my hand to her.

“Better, Tommy?” she asked in a voice of such concern that I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, for there was something so disconcertingly touching in her wide anxious eyes,

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usually so fierce, that I felt a strange emotion shake me. I couldn’t decide whether it was pleasant or painful; but as I lay there and felt her little fingers about my brow there seemed to be something very wonderful about it all. For I had no desire to get strong and well again if I might have Jenny to tend and comfort me like this.

But the weakness was only momentary, for I felt a sudden shame at the unmanly sentiment; and putting Jenny’s hands aside, rather roughly I’m afraid, I sat up and said, “There, that’s enough.” I jumped out of bed, pretending to feel nothing of my aches and soreness, though still acutely conscious of them.

Jenny fell back with a little “Oh!” and her eyes grew harder.

Perhaps I felt a slight compunction at having so churlishly repaid her care and tenderness, but that unpleasant sense of shame at having yielded to a weak and babyish emotion wouldn’t let me tell her how dearly I held her. But it pained me to see her standing away from me, surveying me gloomily, stroking her hands together as though I had hurt them. I wanted to say something to set all right again, but all I could say was, “I must be quick, Jenny.” I began pulling on my clothes, for some one had undressed me.

Then she smiled at me, and I felt relieved; for there had seemed for a moment the menace of thunder in the air, but now I knew the storm had blown over.

“Let me help you,” she said, as I struggled against my stiffness, reaching round for the sleeve of my jacket. And soon I was dressed and armed again, and felt like a man.

I took a turn up and down the room to reassure myself that I was indeed master of my faculties; and then would have opened the door and gone downstairs. But Jenny stopped me,

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saying, "You can't go yet, Tommy." She gripped my arm and pulled me back.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Not yet," was all she answered.

"But why?" I pressed in growing surprise.

She watched me silently for a moment or two, then said, "Well, I'll tell you, Tommy. You see ... But are you hungry?" she broke off.

The sudden question seemed to create as sudden an appetite. I said I was, very hungry. She told me to stay there, and cautiously left the room, and after a while came tripping lightly back with half a meat pie and a bottle of wine under her arm.

"There," she said, laying down the spoils, "I'll tell you while you eat." So I set to with a relish, while Jenny told me the story of the day's happenings.

Firstly, it seems, Worthing had arrived the day before and had told the Captain, who had been fretting at my sudden disappearance, the cause of it; and he had gone to Rancey Bridge to enquire into the matter. That had given the authorities the information they had been wanting; but in spite of the Captain's appeals they wouldn't release me. However, he had made a fresh attempt that morning, and there had been a splendid battle; but again he had failed to recover me. Then shortly after he had left the school my flight must have been discovered, as it would have been earlier had not Staggers been imprisoned and so unable to report my escape. What had happened to Worthing I could only surmise, for Jenny said nothing of the matter, and listening to her story I had little leisure to think deeply of his case. I suffered a passing pang on his account, and forgot him.

Jenny had been alarmed to see her father returning in a

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terrified state; and rushing up the stairs he had vanished into his room where he had locked himself in muttering, "The officers! the officers!" It must have been almost immediately after his visit that my escape was discovered, and the officers had followed straight away on his track

expecting to find me at his house. I didn't trouble to question exactly why he had been terrified; I was anxious to know what had happened to the officers. Evidently they had been met at the door by the impassive Abou, and quietly hushed away.

Meanwhile Jenny had kept my presence in her room a profound secret. That had been her little romance, and she had wanted it all to herself. So I must wait, she told me, till the night came, and then I could escape in safety.

I think her story and my meal ended simultaneously, for as I pushed away my plate, licking in the clinging fragments from my lips, she sat down beside me with a plump of her little body, and said, "There, Tommy; and I watched you sleep, oh, so long. But I like to see your eyes."

Again I felt that unpleasant and unaccountable awkwardness, and sniggered rather stupidly. Jenny relieved the situation by exclaiming suddenly, "I don't hate Worthing any more."

"Ah, Worthing!" I ejaculated; and again I was wrung with doubt as to what had happened to him when my escape had become known. Had he first made good his own retreat? Somehow I didn't think so. It wasn't like Worthing to run away. Well, they would have little mercy on him.

"He told me, Tommy," Jenny went on with hesitation, and finished, "what you wouldn't tell me."

"Ah," I said.

Then she suddenly sprang up, her eyes blazing, her fists clenched in the manner I knew well, and said with fierce

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vigour, "Yes, I know what they did to you. And I've seen too. I hate them. Oh, how I *hate* them!"

"It's their way," I said.

"But they won't catch you again, will they, Tommy?" She put her hands on my shoulders and said, "Promise?" as I had heard her say it twice before.

I laughed, and answered, "It won't be my fault if they do."

"Ah! ..." Her hands dropped.

"And Worthing came and told you," I said; my thoughts again reverting to my friend with his strange loyalty, some? times so considerate, sometimes so cruel.

Jenny answered, "He just said, 'They lock him up in a dark cell. They give him a crust and water three times a day. And they flog him naked every morning.' That's what he said. And he looked at me, and I could see it."

I could hear the words as Worthing would have said them. Just the plain facts of the case, and nothing more.

"Yes," I said, musing; then, "Well, it's over, and I shan't go back again. And to-night I'll be off, Jenny."

She turned to a drawer and took out a bundle neatly folded and strapped, and said, "Here's your things. There's some food. And here's some money." She gave me a golden guinea.

"Jenny!" I exclaimed.

"You'll need it," she said simply.

"But I'll never spend it," I declared, again under the power of that unnerving emotion. "I shall keep this as long as I live."

It was Jenny herself who dashed my ardour. "You'll keep it," she said, "till you're hungry."

But I registered a silent vow to keep it for ever in memory of my little playmate. I put it carefully in my inmost pocket.

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And so we talked together. I told Jenny how I had escaped, and what Worthing had done for my sake. And as I told the story I realized more than ever the significance of the self-abnegating act. To save me he had made himself a liar and a thief. What that must mean to one with his passion for law and authority I could only dimly imagine. As for me I should have been willing to perjure myself a hundred times over for anyone I loved, but I knew by all my experience of his nature how such guilt would rankle in Worthing's soul. He had set himself up against the law. He had violated the ruling principle of his life. He had swerved aside from the clear straight path he had marked out for himself. And all to save his friend, whose conduct he had never pretended to sympathize with or condone.

I worked myself up into a fine emotion as I spoke of all this to Jenny. She said thoughtfully, "He loves you, Tommy; that's why."

I thought I could read in her steady eyes, "And I would have done the same."

So the evening wore away, while the darkness closed in like a visible shadow drawing ever nearer. And it was time for me to depart.

CHAPTER XIX

INTO THE FIRE

I OPENED the window and looked out into the night, glad to see the sky veiled in thick clouds which didn't let a single star through. For the darkness would befriend me better than the brightest moon. I said good-bye to Jenny, and climbed out on to the sill, and feeling for a firm branch of ivy carefully began to lower myself till my face was on a level with the window-ledge. There I paused to say a last farewell, and Jenny stooping swiftly caught my cheeks between her little hands and kissed me with a passionate vigour, saying, "You'll find him, Tommy?"

"And kill him," I answered, and recommenced the descent.

I reached the ground safely, and looking up heard a faint whisper, "Good-bye, Tommy; good-bye." But it was too dark to see my little friend; and I moved away, keeping close to the wall.

I hadn't gone many yards before I was arrested by the faintest sound of footsteps in front of me. Immediately my mind filled with thoughts of the officers. They were lurking there for me. I stood still and listened. I wasn't mistaken. The sound was repeated; stealthily, as though some one was creeping towards me through the darkness. Had I been heard too? I asked myself. I thought not, for I had taken every precaution, treading as softly as I knew how. But was it safest to retreat, or to wait where I was? For a moment or

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two I waited listening whether the steps would approach me or not. For a while I heard nothing, and thought they had ceased. Then close to me I heard a louder crunch on the path, and I realized that only a few paces separated me from this unknown prowler who I felt convinced was on my trail. The sudden proximity nerved me to action. I glided back on the way I had come, but a treacherous twig cracked beneath my heel with a report like a pistol. I stood petrified, straining eyes and ears for signs of my pursuer. But he seemed to have halted. The air was deathly still. I pressed on again, hugging the wall, and felt where it opened back into a low doorway. I crept into the crevice, and silently strained against the little door; but it was locked. Indeed, I didn't expect to find it otherwise, for I

remembered it, and knew it was never used. I thought my best plan was to wait under the archway, where if it came to blows I could take my enemy by surprise.

I crouched into the darkness, listening for his approach. Still the silence remained unbroken, and my ears filled with that shrill singing which is only heard when the air is utterly still. The singing became so loud that I feared I wouldn't hear a sound if one came. Then I grew aware that the edge of my foot was resting on a pebble. I was terrified lest it should somehow shoot from beneath me and betray my hiding-place. But an inspiration came to me. Slowly I stooped down and took the pebble in my hand, then carefully threw it in front of me among the shrubbery that bordered the other side of the path. I thought my pursuer hearing it would turn and follow the sound. I heard it fall with a dull thud on the earth beyond the bushes. I had thrown too far. To give the rustling sound I intended it should have fallen in among the twigs.

However, I drew myself up silently and listened. I thought

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I could distinguish a faint movement. And it seemed that my pursuer was nearer than before. Would he step aside after the false trail? But another stir in the darkness told me he was still on my track.

I began to stoop for another pebble. I thought the manœuvre was worth a second trial. But as I stooped my arm touched something soft. My muscles stiffened, and my heart gave a bound, for I had touched a man. I dared not move; hardly dared breathe. I wanted to turn and look, but I couldn't control a nerve. Then I seemed to hear a deep slow breathing beside me. It was more a motion of the air than a sound. Summoning my utmost courage I turned my head. Very faintly in the blackness I could distinguish a sort of lesser dimness which I knew was a face. And I knew too that the eyes were fixed upon me. They seemed to be glowing at me, though nothing of them could I actually see. It was merely that I felt them there like a paralyzing spell.

Then suddenly my attention was diverted. Close to me on the other side I heard the faint fillip of a stone on the path. I was caught in the trap all right. I expected every moment to feel a hand grip me from one side or the other. But nothing happened, and the strain became intolerable. I wanted to scream aloud, to spring out from the archway and into the open. What were they waiting for? Why didn't that hidden spy in the corner give the signal?

Why didn't my first pursuer put out a hand and feel for me? They seemed to be playing with me, a cruel sort of game. I was fairly trapped, but they wished to linger out the agony. A terrible sweat broke out on my brow; my tongue went dry; my throat was so parched I could scarcely breathe. And all the while I could feel as it were a heavy shadow palpably

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closing in from either side. Then suddenly I caught my breath and choked.

That broke the spell. I sprang away. I thought I felt a hand clutch me from behind as though to stop me; but before I had fled a couple of steps there was a splitting pain at my head as though something had burst within it; and before I lost consciousness I knew that some one had struck me a dizzying blow.

I awoke to a sort of disturbed dreaming long before I awoke to reality. There was a heavy confusion in my mind as though I were being swung at the end of a long chain. There was a rushing and buzzing in my ears, and sometimes a sudden cessation as though the whole world were frozen into a momentary immobility. Then with a wrench I was dizzily spinning again in a sickening circle. But by degrees the spinning seemed to slacken, and then I was tossing uneasily with short lurchings and swayings as though I were suspended from a high roof with a company of giants swinging me from one to another. For sometimes I was tearing through the air; and then I would stop with a thud and a jerk to be sent racing away once more. And always there was a sort of burdensome cloud weighing at my heart, strangely oppressing me with stifling fold upon fold of black vapour. And the cloud seemed to grow, till it enveloped my whole body; and the noise of the air rushing past me became muffled and far away, as though I were swathed in huge blankets of palpable clinging gloom. I struggled against it, and longed even for the sickening hiss of the air about my face, for something seemed to be sucking at my lungs so that I couldn't draw a mouthful of breath.

So tossed with such evil fancies I was gradually shaken back to consciousness, and at length knew that I was stiflingly

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gagged and bound, with something over my face shutting out the cool night air, if night it were, and making the world for me a wall of solid blackness. I knew also that I was being carried on somebody's back; and over very

uneven country, I thought, for my body, not by any means recovered from its stiffness and soreness, was being jolted cruelly as my captor pushed on with thumping strides.

It was useless trying to struggle or to utter the least sound. I did make one frenzied effort; but though the blood seemed to be bursting at my veins I couldn't so much as twitch a muscle. I believe if I hadn't lapsed again into unconsciousness I should have gone mad, for there seemed to well up from the very depths of my being as it were a scream of frenzy heaving to be uttered but unable to burst free, and with a sense of convulsed suffocation I felt the darkness close about me again and my senses were mercifully sealed.

So with a wavering mist about me, which sometimes opened to let through a dim and filmy light, to darken again into an impenetrable gloom, I was borne on and on, interminably it seemed to my dazed mind. Then the jolting jog gave place to a smooth tranquillity, and a vague rhythmic grinding told me I was in a boat on the-river. And later I felt a heaving and sinking, and knew I was on the sea.

The sea!

Perhaps it was the sudden realization that I was out upon the beloved sea that revived me; or perhaps it was merely that the stifling wrapper had been removed from my face, and I could breathe again in ease and comfort. I found too that my limbs were free, though still cruelly stiff. But with the discovery I sat up, for I had been lying down, and looked about me.

Little enough could I make out, for it was dark in the

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cabin, if cabin it were, and only from one side came a faint blur of lesser darkness. I half wondered whether it were early morning or late evening, for the past seemed so far away that a day might easily have slipped over. Also I realized that during the day, supposing a day to have gone by, the wind had risen, for it had been serenely calm when I had left Sunset Towers.

I rose, and treading cautiously for the ship was rolling and I was unsteady from my long dizziness and swooning, I made my way to the spot from where the dim light seemed to be coming. It had appeared a long way off, but suddenly I found myself upon it. It was a glazed window, and perpendicular shadows down it told me it was barred on the outside. I tried to gaze out upon the sea, but it was too dark for me to distinguish anything,

except indeed the faintly luminous white of the water where the ship cut through. Yet the thought that I was at sea was exhilarating, and rapidly my nausea fell away, and I drew in deep breaths as though to fill my lungs with the delicious salt air, though in the cabin there was little but the smell of pitch and damp canvas and rotting cordage.

At a sudden thought I thrust my hand beneath my cloak. My weapons had both gone. But rummaging vaguely in my pockets I felt Jenny's guinea, and somehow the feel of it in my fingers gave me a sense of companionship and comfort.

Next I began to explore my prison, for I didn't dare hope it was anything else; nor did I begin to reason out yet what strange cause had brought me there. It was enough for the moment to take bearings of my surroundings. And it was soon done. For I was confined in a box rather than a cabin. There was a pile of damp canvas matting on which I had been lying, but otherwise there was nothing in the place at all; and it measured only three of my full paces either way. I felt

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for the door. The handle turned, but the door was firmly locked or bolted on the other side. I shook it, not vigorously, but merely to learn whether there were anyone on guard; and sure enough a harsh, deep voice from the outside advised me with an oath to keep quiet.

Then indeed I sat down on my pile of canvas and started to think. But with little result. I couldn't imagine what could have induced my captors to kidnap me in this way and take me out to sea. Indeed, I wondered now whether it was the officers after all who had caught me. Was there another on my track? My father's secret enemy, it might be. Perhaps now the persecution was to include me too. But who was that other one who had been hidden under the archway? What was his part in the drama? And then the memory of the paralysing fear I had felt told me it must have been the witch, Bite-in-the-Dark. I shuddered at the thought. Was it indeed she? I found no answer to all these questionings, but tossed them vainly about in my muddled mind till all was chaos and confusion. And after all, I told myself, it might be a mistake. I preferred to accept that solution, for it was the most consoling. And yet for the life of me I couldn't imagine any set of circumstances to account for such an error. So telling myself it was all a mistake which would soon be rectified, yet believing deep within me that

the shadow of fear which had darkened my father's life was now closing about me too, I lay down and tried to sleep.

But the morning brought no comfort. I discovered that I was in some part of the deck-house. I could hear the carpenter at work close by, and the smell of sizzling pork told me that the galley wasn't far distant. There were voices too, but in spite of my knocking and shouting no one took the least heed of me. I peered out through the window which gave on to a

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strip of deck, pressing my face to the pane, waiting for some one to pass by. But no one came, and I fell back to-'my pallet disheartened.

Eventually a great rough fellow, the one I suspect who had growled at me outside the door, brought me a hunk of pork on a slab of bread and a tin of vile coffee. But to all my questioning he wouldn't answer a word except, "The skipper'll settle you all right; don't you fear."

Later in the day I demanded to see the skipper, and was told that the longer it was before I saw him the healthier it would be for me.

So I gazed through the little window growing more and more disconsolate, till even the swaying of the waves as they slid out from beneath the vessel and tossed their manes and curved away to the open waters failed to stir my ardour. The wonder became a grey monotony, which brought with it even an accustomed sickness; for as a rule I was a good sailor, and in other circumstances would have gloried in the swelling monsters which pushed up from under the vessel to drop her into a deep pool of overshadowing green. But now I felt strangely dizzy, and for a while lay rolling on the floor vomiting miserably; and it didn't seem to matter in the least whether the vessel and all within it should sink to the bottom of the sea.

So another night came, and another day, without change, except that I wasn't sick again, though the ship lurched more heavily and staggered uneasily forward as though a gale were rising. But with my captivity a dull and unusual brooding settled upon my spirit. I began to ask why fate had marked me out beyond all others for such unaccountable trials and reverses. I seemed to be the plaything of some brutal and implacable tyrant whose sport it was to dance me from adversity

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to adversity, tantalizing me by glimpses of desirable havens, but whisking me off and away again before I had time to fix my moorings. But mercifully I was still too young for such ideas to take deep root. The problems of evil and the destiny of man were beyond my scope of meditation.

However, during the days that passed so slowly and so wearily I thought much of my father and Worthing and Jenny. I had leisure to set many things in their right places in my mind, and arrange them in some sort of proportion and perspective. For instance, the picture of Worthing's sacrifice of honour for the sake of friendship grew like a visible thing before my eyes, till I bowed myself down and cried for the hurt my folly had done him. Then, too, I could see quite plainly now that I was deceiving Jenny inexcusably. She had sent me forth, having buckled on my armour as it were, to track down her father's foe. Believing in me as her champion she had hidden me and tended me all that day. She had put me in her own bed; she had bound up my wounds, and brought me food. And I had accepted her care as my due reward. I was masquerading, playing the hero, when all I wished was to escape from her and find my father. The thought didn't please me, but in compensation I told myself I would keep my word to her somehow, and put an end to that evil that was darkening her father's life.

But how? What clue had I? What clue did she think I had? Poor little Jenny! In her simplicity I supposed all she thought I had to do was to enquire of the first stranger and receive an answer to the riddle. Indeed the task seemed hopeless. I knew just nothing of the affair. Well, at least I would find my father. He might help me. At any rate he could teach me something of the technique of the sleuth. And

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meanwhile I wouldn't return to Jenny till I had accomplished something worthy of her trust in me.

So I watched and waited, settling my plans as though I were free and not a prisoner in the power of an unknown foe. I counted the days, in an agony lest the first of May should come and pass, and the ship not touch land, nor any prospect show itself of release from this unaccountable captivity.

The last day of April came, and with it a buffeting wind. Slowly the grey sky darkened towards evening. I made a frantic appeal to my jailer to take me to the captain, but the surly fellow glanced darkly at me without a word. I clutched him as he left the cabin, but he put out a great foot and sent me

staggering across the floor to jolt against the partition and collapse half-winded.

There seemed no hope. In the evening an angry sun broke from the clouds and set full ahead. Languidly I told myself we were steering west. Then I threw myself across the floor, and with my face in my hands gave way to a fit of inconsolable weeping.

CHAPTER XX

AT THE DAWN OF A SUMMER'S DAY

IT was still dark when I awoke to feel rough hands about me, and the tightening grip of ropes around my arms and legs. I shouted, and a huge hand was promptly clapped across my mouth, and a moment later a suffocating gag, knotted mercilessly at the back of my neck, stifled the least groan. A bandage, too, was fastened over my eyes. I made one convulsive effort to burst the bonds which were rapidly netting me about, but with the only result that they were twisted the more cruelly, crushing me in as though by the embrace of some enormous bear, till I thought my ribs would crack beneath the strain.

The agony was almost unendurable, and was made still worse by the gag over my mouth; for it would have been some relief to have been able to rage and curse and scream. But not a sound could I utter. It seemed as though a terrible explosive force were being compressed within me, unable to burst free. And then a sacking of some kind was drawn over my head, and the mouldy reek of it made me want to vomit; and though suffocating for lack of air it was even worse agony to breathe the foul fumes that came through the filthy stuff about my face. A spasm convulsed my whole body from within, but the cords around me were too tight to allow so much as a tremble to shake my limbs; and then I felt suddenly limp and made no struggle, but yielded to the inevitable

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without a question or a hope. Something was about to happen at last. Perhaps I was to be thrown into the sea. Well, life's whole treatment of me had been so unjust, so spiteful, and during the last two weeks so cruel and intolerable, that any sort of end would be a relief.

So I gave no heed to the bumpings and shakings I had to undergo. I didn't ask myself what was happening to me. And lying calmly so I was probably happier than questioning and struggling. It was impossible for me to stir a finger to help myself. I simply didn't care what became of me. I think I even fell into swooning sleep, so indifferent was I to my fate. For I was tired out with my captivity, first at Rancey Bridge and then in this vessel, and my spirit was broken.

But if I swooned or slept I was roused to consciousness again by the feel of cold water about my legs. I thought I had passed beyond all self-concern, but at the touch of the sea my love of life revived, and I became acutely aware of all that was happening to me. My feet were being fixed to something, and I was being held upright, for I couldn't support myself; not only was I too securely bound to have any control of my limbs, but there was a swaying and lurching beneath me which would have made standing difficult in any case. I began to wonder where I was; but all I could surmise was that I was on an open raft being tossed up and down at sea. Presently the worst of the tossing stopped, and I assumed we had come into quieter water. But why were my feet being fixed to the raft? Why was I being held upright? Then with a deeper dip of the raft I felt a sharp upward jerk beneath my arms; there was a rope fixed about me from somewhere above. But what did it mean? Then the hands that had been supporting me were withdrawn, and I began to

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sway dizzily; but the rope clutched at me viciously as I fell. For a while I lurched backwards and forwards, my feet fixed to the raft, if raft it were, as it rose and sank with the waves, and the rope catching me with malicious jerks as I toppled and swung.

Then suddenly the terrible significance of it all was borne in upon me with a cruel clearness. I seemed to hear my father telling over again that story of dreadful vengeance, the most appalling that the brutal minds of smugglers and pirates could devise; and at the thought of it an agonized cry gushed up from my soul, though not a murmur could pass my lips. For I knew I was hanging between earth and sea, and my fate was to be slowly drawn asunder between them; for as the tide ebbed the raft beneath me would sink and the rope above me would tighten, till gradually my body would be stretched and strained to an agonizing death. The realization came to me with a shock of horror, the more so as my father's vivid story had impressed me with the lingering torment I might expect to suffer. I ceased even to cry out in my heart, "Why, why, why?" as I had done on board ship, exclaiming against the malignant destiny that ever pursued me. For with the fear of such a death upon me I had no place in my mind for anything except the frenzied anticipation of it in all its horror. And still the raft rolled beneath me. I lurched and toppled, while the rope gripped me like a relentless hand which would soon be tightening to drag me limb from limb.

Then I felt the sacking over my face being removed, and I caught my first keen whiff of the beautiful sea air. It came like a cruel reminder of all I was about to lose, and once again a spasm of surgent rebellion against my fate convulsed me. The pain of it was dreadful, for still it was as though that violent explosive power were struggling to burst free from

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within me, but was restrained by an aching pressure at every pore.

Then fingers were tearing at the bandage over my eyes, and it was wrenched roughly away; and I could see, but not distinctly. For it was still in the dusk of the early morning, and I seemed to be in a cave of some kind, for before my eyes the air grew into a darkness of retreating gloom. But I couldn't turn my head to see what lay on either side of me, though the swaying of the raft gave me passing glimpses of a dark rock wall dripping with damp and spray.

But what came upon my vision with a shock, at first of rapture, then of strange fear, and lastly whirling me in a maze of mystified wonder, was a face very white against the shadow, with wide terrible eyes fixed on mine as though in a frenzy. For the face was the face of Dirk.

Forgetting my gag I raised my voice to cry his name, and the sudden checking of my breath sent the blood surging dizzily to my head, so that my eyes clouded with a gush of darkness and I nearly swooned. But as my sight cleared terror began to settle on my heart, for Dirk faced me with eyes blazing with such a madness of hate, and his lips curled into such a leer of malice, that the dreadful vision framed white against the darkness was like some emanation from a terrible dream. And slowly he drew nearer, his eyes fixed on mine, till at length his face almost touched me, and I could feel his breath curl hotly about my brow. And all the while I was too numbed and stupefied to ask myself what it could mean.

Then I noticed a change come over his face. He drew back; the tension of his evil glare relaxed, and a puzzled wavering loosened his lips. Then he suddenly darted his face once more at mine, searching my eyes for I knew not what. And then he turned me about to the light, and with an oath

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began fingering the gag about my mouth, and tore it violently off, staring at me like a madman.

"Dirk!" I croaked out faintly, "save me, Dirk!"

“Devil of hell!” he cried. “It’s Tommy!”

He drew his knife and slashed feverishly at the rope beneath my arms, cursing at the strands that foiled his impatient onslaught. But at last they came away in his hands; then stooping he set to work to release my feet, while I half fell on top of him, supporting myself as well as I could on the unsteady raft, till one by one the cords that bound me were cut away. With a wonderful sense of freedom I kicked my legs and waved my arms, then collapsed on to the raft half delirious from the sudden relief. Dirk lifted me into his boat; and so overpowering was the good thought of life again, and the clean air after the stuffy suffocation of the gag and the sacking, and the feel of the blood flushing along my numbed limbs and tingling in my feet and fingers, that I lay in the rocking boat and sobbed like a child.

Presently I looked up through my tears, smiling I think, to see Dirk seated above me, his head in his hands and his elbows on his knees, still gazing at me half frenziedly, till I began to wonder whether the veil had lifted only to fall again.

I stopped my crying, and laying my hands on his knees said, “Dirk, what is it? Why do you want to kill me?”

“Little kid Tommy” was all he could say, repeating it over and over. He thrust a hand through my hair, tenderly enough for such a great rough fellow, and bending my head back looked at me earnestly and enquiringly. At last he fetched a heavy breath and said, “Yus, it’s little kid Tommy, an’ no mistake. But it beats me; it beats me.”

I understood nothing of the matter that was troubling him.

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I was utterly without a clue to the mystery. I could only say, “Tell me, Dirk; what is it?”

It was a long time before he answered, “Wull, kiddy, I was on his track, an’ I thought I’d got him at last; but it was you I nabbed, though hell knows how it chanced.”

“Who was he?” I asked. But before he replied I knew whom he meant.

“Have you forgotten, kiddy?” he asked. “The King’s Man.”

“You found him?” I questioned.

“I’ve hunted him high an’ low,” he replied, “an’ I’ve had my fingers on him, *so!*” He clawed the air about my throat. “But he’s slipped through every time, blast him! He’s got as many shapes as a cloud in a gale, an’ as many voices as the wind; so when they telled me you was only a nipper I

grinned to meself an' said nothing. You see I thought I had him safe. But it beats me, it does."

He shook his head sorrowfully.

I was beginning to understand something of the mystery, and suddenly everything seemed clear as though I had followed it in a book. "Dirk," I cried, "I know how it was. He was hiding in the corner. He was chasing me. An officer, you know. I'd run away from school. Then I suppose he heard you after him, and lay low. And I heard you and thought it was him. So I hid there in the doorway. And then I felt him there and got frightened, and jumped out, and you nabbed me instead." I ended breathlessly: "You see, you see."

He scratched his head somewhat bewildered, and said, "Here, kiddy, just say that lot again."

So I began at the beginning, and explained how the officers were after me, and how I had heard footsteps and taken cover, till comprehension dawned on him at last. "That's him,"

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I concluded, "that's the King's Man; the officer who was waiting there for me."

Dirk sat there weighing the matter in his mind, and presently exclaimed, "An' it were you, Tommy, I've been keeping in that filthy hole, starving you an' gagging you an' frightening you an' all."

"Nothing," I said, "nothing," and to ease his mind added: "Don't you see, if you hadn't nabbed me the officer would have had me instead, and I should have been back in the cells again."

"That's a brave thing to say, kiddy," he exclaimed fervently, and seized my hand, till I nearly cried with the pain of a friendly grip. "Wull," he added releasing me, and thumping his fist on his knee, "I'll go an' find him again, an' I'll catch him next time. An' then I'll ... You know what I meant doing?" he broke off fiercely.

"Yes," I said.

"Ha!" he cried, grinning evilly, "I'll tear him limb from limb; slowly, kiddy, *slowly!*" He stressed the word lingeringly. "An' I'll sit just here an' watch his eyes, same as I meant to this morning."

He sat motionless awhile, gazing terribly before him as though witnessing his cruel revenge in actual progress.

“Six hours,” he said. Then with an oath he dashed his hand across his eye as though to obliterate the picture, and smiling more pleasantly said, “Wull, let’s row in for a bit, an’ then for something wet at the *Dolphin*.”

“The *Dolphin*!” I cried.

I gazed about me, and realized where we were. It was the very spot where the betrayal had been committed which was to have been so horribly expiated. We were by the Smugglers’ Gate in Ebb-Tide Cave.

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Ebb-Tide Cave!

“Dirk,” I cried in sudden excitement, “is this the first of May?”

“Ay, kiddy,” he answered, “it is that.”

My father’s song came into my mind. I could almost hear him singing it:

“’Twas at Ebb-Tide Cave by the Smuggler’s Gate.

At the dawn of a summer’s day;

And there those happy lovers met,

All on the first of May.”

So vivid was the fancy that I could actually hear my father’s voice that I sat motionless, listening, till Dirk asked what ailed me.

“Oh, Dirk,” I said, “you must have fallen from Heaven. I’ve got to meet my father here to-day; and you’ve brought me.”

“Fallen from Heaven!” he repeated, his lips curling bitterly. “Yus, I reckon I have that. An’ I don’t see myself climbing back again. An’ so,” his voice changed, “your dad’s coming, is he? Wull, I’ll be off an’ leave you to him then. An’ if I see him at the *Dolphin* I’ll let him know there’s a surprise packet down this way.”

He rowed me out into the Pool, where a great wind greeted us, and landed me on the rocks, then turned to row in up the Smugglers’ Tunnel, for the tide was still almost at the full. But I suddenly remembered my knife and pistol. I think he understood my gesture as I clapped my hands to my sides feeling for them. He smiled darkly and nodded at my waist. I looked down; and there they were tucked in my belt, and in my excitement I hadn’t noticed them. He didn’t explain the mystery, but I thought I understood it: the sight of them

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there, to hand, yet useless, would have been an added torment to the perishing victim. So he left me and I watched him vanish, then clambered up the cliff so that I could see if any boat were making for the shore, and also if any one appeared from above, for I didn't know whether my father would come by sea or land; but that he would come I held for a certainty.

Half-way up I found a good lookout point, and sat down and waited, my heart in a whirl of excitement at the prospect of seeing my father again. Indeed the joy of meeting him was so great that I hardly had a thought to bestow on the extraordinary way I had been spirited to the rendezvous.

So I sat there gazing out to sea, glorying in the huge bursting rollers that strained and pounded at the rocks beneath me; for a south-west gale was racing in across the white-streaked waters, dewing my face with the spray in its breath and slapping my hair in heavy, damp tangles against my forehead. Before me lying out at anchor in the heaving sea was the brig that had brought me there; and away to the east the sky was reddening with the coming of the sun.

CHAPTER XXI

ALL ON THE FIRST OF MAY

FOR a while I sat there in a delicious waking dream. The shadows of the past fell away from me, and the future held no visible menace. Indeed I didn't think of the future. The present was all my concern, or at least only so much of the future as would bring my father back to me. Beyond that I didn't look. Already my schooling in adventures and surprises was teaching me to live in to-day and let to-morrow shift for itself. So much could happen in a single hour that foresight and circumspection were a wasted labour.

So I yielded to blissful anticipation, so near as it seemed to immediate realization, and saw no cloud in the sky of my contentment. Even the day was such as I loved. The hallooing of the wind, the bursting of the waves, the salt-laden scent of the racing air, the bounding vitality and keen stinging sweetness of it all, were like a triumphal chant of the blood and the breath. It was as though the earth and sea were living things, and my spirit was exalted at the rapture of their boisterous play.

It wasn't immediately that I realized the meaning of certain pebbles and clods of earth that came rolling down the cliff to either side of me. I was too preoccupied to look up all at once. But when a heavier lump came bounding down almost at my elbow I turned to see what the cause of it might be. It was merely somebody climbing down the cliff, and rolling

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stones at me, either to have a game with me or to attract my attention. I thought probably it was the latter, for when he saw me gazing up at him he stopped and began waving to me; and it looked as though he were shouting, but the wind was in his teeth and I couldn't catch a sound.

And then I sprang to my feet and gazed with a searching scrutiny at the waving figure, for it was none other than Worthing.

Just for a moment I stood vacantly wondering how he had found me out, but dismissing the question I accepted the fact of his presence, and started scrambling up the sloping track towards him, the great wind heaving me upwards from behind like a huge helping hand.

“Why, Worthing!” I panted as I reached him and seized his hand. “Worthing! ...”

The question I would have put to him was implied in my cry of astonishment.

“It’s quite simple,” he answered me. “I knew where you would go, and I followed.”

I didn’t stop to explain the amazing way in which I had reached my destination. That story would keep. What I wanted to know was what had happened to him when my escape had been discovered, and why he had left school. I put the questions to him, not very coherently, for a sense of shame prevented me from asking, “What did they do to you?” But he took my meaning, and answered me, “They said a lot of things about me; publicly, of course. And they flogged me.”

“Flogged you!” I cried; nearly adding his own comment, “publicly, of course.”

“At least it was an experience,” he said.

“Oh, Worthing!” I exclaimed in remorse, feeling behind

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his calm words the disgust of the indignity still rankling in his mind. “Worthing, it was all my fault.”

“Look here, Tommy,” he replied, “it was my own deliberate choice.”

“No!” I said.

“Yes!” he answered curtly. “Please give me credit for knowing my own mind.”

He looked at me in his settled, uncompromising way, and I could say no more. I wrung his hand in silence, and there was a pause. I didn’t dare ask for further particulars. Indeed there was no need. My imagination could fill in with abundant details the outline he had drawn for me. They had flogged him! Worthing, the soul of law and discipline! The thing seemed incredible. They had flogged him! His very pride seemed a shield sufficient to ward off such a calamity. But they hadn’t spared him. I turned to him with a cry of gratitude, but he was saying, “The Captain was terribly uneasy about you when I told him you had escaped and disappeared.”

“Ah,” I said; and wondered whether he would mention Jenny.

“I told him,” he went on, “that I would find you and send you back to him.”

“Yes,” I said doubtfully; and added, “Is that why you followed me?”

“Not exactly,” he replied. “I had decided on that before. I had committed my offence and taken my punishment. There was nothing else to wait for. I made up my mind to leave the place as soon as the affair was over. I shall go to my uncle in London. But first I thought I should like to find you, Tommy.”

Again I wrung his hand, and in what stumbling words I could lay tongue to was trying to tell him how dear he was to

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me, but suddenly he pointed below where a schooner was staggering round the headland. But what I saw was a little boat already threading the channel into Ebb-Tide Pool, bobbing like a see-saw on the backs of the rearing waves. The tide was ebbing, and I wondered whether the boat would make the entrance, but as I looked it rose on a leaping crest and plunged through the narrow passage into the Pool, where it disappeared under the overhanging arch. But I had recognized the solitary oarsman, though his back had been towards me. It was my father.

I waved frantically as he vanished under the brow of rock, and hallooed into the wind with all my might, though I knew well that my voice couldn't reach him in that gale. But I was so excited that the wind beating the words back into my face only made me shout the more; and I set off down the cliff, slipping and leaping, with Worthing following more cautiously behind me. I was afraid my father would row in up the tunnel, where I would be unable to follow unless I swam for it. But with a cry of relief I welcomed him as I saw him appear again, climbing up the cliff towards me.

I stopped for a moment and waved to him, but he hadn't seen me, and suddenly I thought I would hide and lie in wait for him to surprise him as he came by. I ducked behind a rock and peered out cautiously to watch for his coming. Looking back I saw Worthing still stepping deliberately down the path. I motioned to him to hide, but he was too concerned with his footing to notice me; he came slowly downwards, pushing into the wind, and steadying himself at every step.

I peeped out again to see if my father were drawing near yet. But he had stopped, and his face was turned away from me. And suddenly he sprang round and began racing down the cliff. I jumped up to see what had alarmed him, but there

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was no one in sight except Worthing. Then faintly from below me, and coming as it seemed from Ebb-Tide Cave, I heard my own voice calling, "Daddy, dad-dee!" as though I were in some terrible peril.

I stood fixed to the spot. A terror such as I had never known set my every nerve quivering. Not even the ghost at Sunset Towers in the dead of a stormy night had seemed so unearthly as the sound of my own voice calling for help there in the light of day. My blood ran cold to hear it. I clutched at the rock beside me, for I felt faint and would have fallen. But as my father still sped downwards, evidently deceived by the cry which kept rising to him, "Daddy, daddy, save me!" I threw off my stupid fear and started running after him, shouting with all my power. But the wind was full in my face, and seemed to sweep the cry from my lips, though I hallooed like one in a frenzy. Then my father dipped under the arch and vanished.

I raised one last despairing cry, and quickened my pace, stumbling and clutching, heedless of knocks and tumbles. For there was an agony of anxiety upon me. A vivid picture was in my mind of my father breaking back into the flames of the burning inn when he thought he heard me calling. It was just the picture I could see; I didn't reason that that had been make-believe merely. Something told me that this at least was earnest. He was being decoyed into a trap. And of all things it was my voice which was luring him on.

I jumped the last few feet, and flinging out an arm swung myself round under the jutting rock. Almost at my feet, so that I nearly fell upon him, was my father, writhing on the ground and choking blood, with a gaping gash across his throat.

Something terrible happened within me. The air around me became a red mist. I felt suddenly possessed of the strength

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of ten men. A frenzied desire to kill surged up at my heart. I caught sight of a moving figure scrambling over the rocks that ringed the Pool. I forgot my father; and with an insane fury of vengeance driving me on I plunged after the fugitive, howling and whooping like a crazed animal.

He was making off towards the sandy bay. I could see it below me with the tumble-down jetty at its farther horn, and beyond was a little smack anchored a stone's throw from the shore out of reach of the worst of the breakers. I guessed that was his goal, and if he gained it he would beat off down the coast, where I couldn't hope to follow with the waves rolling in

above my head. In a fog of rage and madness I stumbled after him, lumbering carelessly and making little ground; for he was nimble and trod lightly, leaping with ease and dexterity from rock to rock, in spite of the slippery weed which here began to drape them treacherously, still wet from the ebbing tide. Then came the short stretch of clear going before the jetty. I thought I might catch him there as he climbed the great obstacle, and I pressed forward, consciously snarling with anger and hate. He reached the space and ran; and I knew that if he slipped as he climbed the slimy stones I should have him. But he bore a little up to the left, and I saw he was making for a gap brokenly boarded in but with the planks and piles hanging awry. It might be possible there to leap without climbing. I hoped he would leap and fall. As my feet touched the sand I raced after him with a yell.

It wasn't till this moment that I remembered my weapons. So primitive were the passions that had been so suddenly whipped up within me that my vision had been one of tearing my enemy piecemeal with my nails and teeth. The memory of my pistol came to me like a shout of laughter. I stopped, and drew the darling weapon from my belt, and levelled it at my

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fleeing foe. My hand was shaky with excitement, and I was afraid I should miss. Taking as careful aim as I could I pulled the trigger and with a howl of evil joy was bounding forward again, for I saw him stumble and fall. He was soon up, however, but was limping in his run. Drawing my knife I sprang after him, gaining steadily, with the picture of my vengeance already vivid in my imagination. But he still ran well, and reaching the gap didn't risk a jump at it with his damaged leg. I saw where without pausing he rested his hand on a broken stump, and vaulted over the barrier. A moment, and I was at the place; and learning wisdom from my foe I didn't risk a fall by a wild leap, but slipping back my knife into my belt I rested my hand where he had taught me, and in my turn vaulted after him. But he was crouching there ready for me, as I might have guessed if my stupid rage hadn't stupefied my wits. Even as I leapt I saw him; but it was too late. He caught me a stunning buffet between the eyes; and with the vision before me of that dreadful face that still haunted my dreams, I fell senseless.

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CHAPTER XXII

WORTHING ASKS QUESTIONS

MY memory is too blurred for me to write in any kind of consistent sequence of what followed. I know it was Worthing who found me lying stunned by the jetty and brought me back to some faint consciousness of reality as he had done that night at Sunset Towers. But it was as though the physical blow had numbed my very reason, for everything was stupidly confused in my mind. Mercifully so, I think; for I hadn't the sense to realize the desolating calamity that had befallen me. Even when I stood beside my dead father and gazed at the pallid face with that dreadful red gash yawning at the throat, I couldn't understand what had really happened. I think I even laughed as though some one were playing a clumsy joke, too extravagant to deceive me. And the sight of the black hollow in the woods where they laid him, tumbling the earth in upon him, didn't shake me from my leaden lethargy. Yet at my heart was a dull pain as though a wound were rankling deep within.

I remember too that certain officers appeared, very officious and inquisitive, and bullied me from my torpor into answering their stupid questions. Sometimes I replied sulkily, and sometimes as they questioned me forgot their very presence, wrapped as I was in a cloud of weary gloom. Then they caught me by the shoulders and shook me, till I cursed them and answered I knew not what. At length they must have abandoned

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the attempt to pump information from such a dry well, for I was left in peace. But at times I was aware of Worthing's voice clear and decided speaking up for me when I sat dully pondering some enquiry which had been demanded of me, utterly failing to understand its significance or applicability to myself.

Indeed it was Worthing who saved me from insanity. For with that incomprehensible slow gloom that had settled upon me, the constant fretting of the officers would have galled me into a savage madness. What I needed was rest and peace, so that the evil black vapour might gradually disperse itself from my spirit, and the light of reality grow clear about me by easy degrees. But the constant questioning puzzled me, and set me

searching in the confusion of my mind for clues and traces of the inexplicable enigma which seemed to be dodging me through the dark complexities of my bemused memory. When it baffled me and I sank into a gloomy stupor, all was well; but sometimes I caught a glimpse of the evil thing, and that was like a wrench to a broken limb, an agony that pierced through the vitals like a sword of white fire. I gasped as though my very soul had been split apart with a wedge of lightning. But the pain was too terrible to endure, and foolishly I dropped back into my moping.

Yet I know that all the while I was saying to myself, "He is dead, dead, dead!" But the knowledge didn't take root in my mind. It was like a knocking from outside, but I wouldn't open the door. I felt there was something evil there; and, though within all was dark and dreadful, yet I wouldn't open to that unknown thing. I only knew it would stand there and knock till I relented, but stubbornly I refused, and shrank deeper into the darkness that closed me round.

All this is but a foolish picture of what I suffered. For

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everything about me was a kind of weighing chaos where I couldn't reason or distinguish. Only, as I say, at times a vivid light broke through, crueller than the shadows that clung about me; for the light was the light of reality, and reality was more terrible than the spiritual coma that had stupefied my understanding.

However, the light was bound to triumph in the end. The knocking became insistent, and I knew I must open the door. And then with the rush of bitter knowledge upon my naked heart I learnt what it was to have a friend. Not that Worthing wept over me. Rather it was his severe strength and calm recognition of actuality that supported me. For in his presence I accepted the inevitable as a thing not to be questioned, merely to be endured. It was the contagion of example rather than of precept, for he never that I remember spoke harshly to me as one must to the hysterical; it was merely that he faced up to the reality of the situation, and I caught something of his straight and uncompromising attitude of soul.

Dirk too nursed me back to sanity in his rough way. Not that I learnt much philosophy from him; rather it would seem that he tended to undo the good that Worthing did me. For if Worthing stimulated me to strength of endurance, Dirk stimulated me to violent rebellion. He took me with him for long marches across the country, and sometimes for a tossing at sea; and

always the burden of his talk was one of cursing and vengeance, till in the blackness of my heart I vowed again and again to track down my father's murderer and kill him without mercy. And at such times Dirk would encourage me with, "That's the gab, kiddy. This an't no world for milk-and-water livers. It's red blood that runs in the heart, my dear, an' that's a stuff that takes some cooling." But unaccountable as it may seem, the medicine of philosophy and the

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medicine of revenge, which might appear to be antidotes, didn't nullify each other. I felt a stimulation from them both. I suppose it was that the one taught me to bear and the other taught me to act. But, however that may be, with the passing of the days I found myself facing the world again, with a bitter sense of loneliness at my heart, but with no craven yielding to circumstance.

It wasn't till I had emerged from the shadow that Worthing seriously set himself to question me on the dark business. And then he was a hundredfold more exacting than the officers had been. First he made me go over again and again the ground of the murder and the pursuit, explaining at every turn just what I had seen and done. And strangely enough each time I seemed to remember some point which had escaped my memory before. Though of what use all this exactitude of detail was to be I couldn't guess. But Worthing was relentless, saying that nothing however trifling must be passed over as the clue might lie in the most unexpected place. However, at last he seemed satisfied that nothing more was to be learnt from the process. But he had reconstructed the murder with convincing probability of detail. The murderer must have known of my father's intended visit. Perhaps he had even heard the song which had warned me of the meeting; or perhaps he had merely followed him, waiting for a chance to strike. Worthing favoured the first theory. Then he pointed out the spot where the murderer had remained concealed till my father should arrive. My father for his part had sailed down on the schooner we had seen, having arranged before to be set ashore. He hadn't rowed up the Smuggler's Tunnel as he didn't know whether the passage was still clear to the woods; the rope ladder might no longer be there. So not seeing me he had started to climb the cliffs, intending to make for the *Dolphin*. Then

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came the puzzling cry for help. I eagerly explained to Worthing the affair of the *Snow Man*, and how my father had rushed back into the burning inn to save me. His enemy must have been on his track even then, and the incident had given him the idea of a ruse which he hadn't yet tried. Well, it had succeeded. He had imitated my voice, and my father had turned, thinking I was below there and in danger. And that was easily explicable, as I might have been exploring in Drift-Wood Cavern. He had turned, unarmed of all suspicion in his sudden belief that I was in peril. And his enemy had caught him off his guard at last, and had killed him.

The murderer had fled, and I had followed. But the smack towards which I thought he had been making was still at anchor when Worthing found me. So then he had had some other retreat in mind. Evidently he knew the coast well. Actually where he had hidden didn't much matter for he must have fled the district long before my wits were clear enough to tell anything of the story. But there was one piece of evidence which set Worthing questioning me. Across my right hand were two ragged gashes. How had they come? I laughed at the question for in my blind pursuit of the murderer I had taken so little heed that it was a wonder I wasn't gashed and bruised from head to heel. But Worthing wouldn't leave it at that. I must think where I was most likely to have hurt my hand. And then it came to me.

"Why," I said, "it was vaulting the jetty."

"Vaulting?" he cried sharply. "You said you jumped it."

I suppose I had done. "Well," I said, "I vaulted over. I saw him vault, and I followed suit."

Worthing looked at me as though astounded, and then said, "Good God, Tommy, and you've only just told me that!

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Come along," he cried, and raced me off to the spot for a further investigation.

And there on the stump where I had rested my hand were two great rusty nails sticking out wickedly from the rotten timber. Indeed it looked as though the gash they had made in the wood had first set it splitting.

Worthing gazed at them, then turned to me and looked at my hand. "Yes," he said, "that's it. And yet in your confounded stupidity you wouldn't have said anything about it!"

To tell the truth I was still rather in a maze at the importance of the find.

“Can’t you see?” cried Worthing, reading my dullness in my vacant stare. “Don’t you realize that he’s probably marked in the same way?”

“Ah, of course,” I said. “He put his hand there too.”

“How wise of you to think of that!” was all he answered. But I believe I would have thought of it long since had it not been for the cloud which hadn’t yet quite lifted from my spirit.

But Worthing hadn’t done with me. For days we strolled the country round, or sat out on the cliffs, or lay in bed with the candle burning to the socket, while I told him everything I could remember of my past life; a hundred times as much as I have written in this book, for I couldn’t distinguish then between the relevant and the irrelevant, and indeed he didn’t wish me to distinguish. If I seemed to be keeping back some trifling detail he would wrest it relentlessly out of me, declaring that he must know everything I could possibly remember, to the very clothes I had ever worn and the very meals I had ever eaten.

At times he listened with his eyes half closed, as though

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waiting for some hint which would set him on a clue, or throw light on other parts of the story which seemed shadowy and inexplicable. And at times he would start up alertly and tell me to repeat something again, spurring on my memory with hints and suggestions.

He brushed aside my question as to how the old hag, Bite-in-the-Dark, had changed into a man; for I had recognized the face of the evil old woman as the blow caught me between the eyes. “Merely a matter of clothes,” said Worthing. But the mention of the manuscript, when I came to that part of the narrative, excited him immensely as though he had hit upon the main trail at last; and my father’s poring over the plans, his explorations of the creeks and pools about the *Dolphin*, and his story of the accursed treasure that night at Sunset Towers, became the nucleus of Worthing’s enquiries. And indeed I wasn’t so lacking in insight as to be unaware of the significance of all this; it was the unifying element which should explain the mystery that baffled me. For in my superstitious way I was inclined to believe it was the working out of the old curse upon yet another victim. The murderer, be he man or woman, I regarded as merely an instrument in the hand of that darker impalpable horror which my father had named Shadow-of-Fear.

But Worthing laughed all such stuff to scorn. He set about hunting for the manuscript among my father's papers, but it was missing. The discovery of its loss set him darkly thinking; and one night when we had been lying silently in bed for a while he suddenly sat up and said: "It's all so ridiculously simple, Tommy, that I'm afraid there's a catch in it somewhere."

"Simple?" I exclaimed.

"Look here," he replied, "just let's put together what we

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actually know. Firstly, it's obvious your father was after that 'unhallowed gold' as you call it. Secondly, the manuscript with the plan is missing. There's evidence enough to piece out the whole story, except the actual identity of the murderer. It's just that somebody else was after that gold as well. He wanted the plan, and he's got it. If we hang about here long enough we shall either be put out of the way or, if we're clever enough to preserve our skins, we shall see the fellow come back and in turn start hunting for the treasure."

It seemed absurdly clear as Worthing expounded it, but it didn't satisfy me. Yet I couldn't explain to Worthing why it didn't satisfy me, for it was merely that in my heart I felt there was something darker and more mysterious than mere greed of gold that had laid my father low. The story of the curse had got into my blood. Indeed it had become a familiar strand woven into all my dreams and colouring my very outlook on life. And this was but natural considering the fear and mystery which had shadowed my short but eventful career, till the unseen world had become as real to me as the seen.

Worthing continued, "How we are to find the murderer is another matter."

"Need we find him?" I asked, forgetting the fine vows I was used to make when in Dirk's company. For my mind was brooding on the horror and inexplicability of it all, and I thought it might be as well to wash my hands of the unholy affair.

"The law demands it," was Worthing's characteristic reply. And he explained what evidence we had and what clues we might follow. There was the probable mark on the man's hand. Then too he must have been in the neighbourhood of the *Snow Man* when my father rushed back into the fire. Probably he had been the cause of the fire itself. Again, he had very

likely been at Rancey Bridge when my father had sung the verse bidding me to the tryst on the first of May. Then there was the affair of the King's Man. My father himself had suggested that that was a trick of his enemy's to put false blame upon him, and so bring down the vengeance of the smugglers on his head. So Worthing went on; and if the strange fear at my heart hadn't cried halt to the enquiry I should have delighted in tracing the mystery and connecting it link by link. But I couldn't throw off the feeling of awe which paralyzed my wits and dulled my enthusiasm for revenge. In spite of the crying wound in my heart I couldn't whip myself up into the mood for retaliation.

Meanwhile Dirk had been hanging idly round the *Dolphin*, his brig lying out to sea, for he had taken it into his head to father me now that I was left a homeless waif to face the world alone. He kept urging me to join him on his vessel and learn the sailor's craft, and to tell the truth I was only too anxious to go, for the call of the sea set my blood dancing. But I couldn't leave Worthing, not at any rate until I had satisfied his curiosity. And even when I thought he must know my story by heart, with all my wanderings from as far back as I could remember, and all the secrets I had discovered around the coast and even at Sunset Towers, when I thought he knew all this yet I couldn't bring myself to part from him unless he wished me to. For I knew I owed him a debt I could never hope to repay. So I was torn between two desires: on the one hand Dirk and the romance of the sea called me to be away on the wonderful summer waters, and on the other hand Worthing and a sense of gratitude held me back on land.

I wondered how it would all end, for I was still too stupid from the effects of the shock I had sustained to be master of my will. But the knot untied itself. For one morning Worthing

came to me and said he was off to London. He had learnt all he could at this end of the trail; now he must go and establish himself in his uncle's graces, and didn't doubt but that he would have leisure and opportunity to work at the mystery and eventually unravel it. His uncle, he knew, would lend him every help, for the case promised to be one of intense interest in the annals of crime.

This method of regarding the tragedy made me wince, but I answered cheerily that I was ready to accompany him.

“But you’re going to sea,” he said.

“To sea?” I repeated.

“Look here, Tommy,” he answered, “what you need is a thorough change. You haven’t got over the shock yet. You’ll have a bad time of it before you can face your life steadily. Well, you go off with Dirk while the summer lasts, and then meet me in London. You see,” he added, “I shall be able to put your affairs straight in the meantime.”

I didn’t understand him. “My affairs?” I queried.

“Tommy,” he said, taking me by the arm, “I’ve pumped you dry during the last few weeks, but you haven’t asked me a question; so I must speak without being asked, that’s all. You remember I was following you down the cliff when you set off in chase of your father’s murderer. Well, when I came up your dad was still living.”

I felt a gush of tears at my eyes, but I dashed them away and said, “Yes?”

“His last thought was for you, Tommy. He gave me a packet which he had in his coat, and I found another in his knapsack in the boat; he didn’t intend that you should miss it. He gave it to me and asked me to see the matter straight. I think he had some sort of confidence in my knowledge of this kind of thing. Of course I promised.”

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“But what is it?” I asked, trying to control my shaky voice. For the picture of my murdered father was vividly before me, and I began to realize as I hadn’t yet done how bitter was my loss.

“There seems to be a fortune,” Worthing continued. “There’s a London firm has charge of the gold, for it isn’t banked. A bank, you see, is a clue for anyone hunting you. Your dad didn’t mean to leave more traces than he could help.”

I thought bitterly that all his caution had been of no avail at the end.

I grasped Worthing’s hand and said, “I don’t know what it all means. You’ll see to it, won’t you?”

He said he had already pledged his word to do so.

So we spent that day together, and the next morning Worthing set off for London, first writing out for me exact instructions where I was to meet

him. Then we tramped to the nearest stage; and I saw him mount the coach and drive away on his mission.

I walked back slowly to the *Dolphin*, my mind growing clearer. Worthing had said I should have a bad time before I learnt to face life steadily; and already with my clearing vision I began to see how desolate the world had become.

PART THREE

DIRK STORMAWAY

CHAPTER XXIII

DIRK TAKES ME IN HAND

FOR a few days my troubles were forgotten, for immediately on my return to the *Dolphin* Dirk marched me away to the shore. At Ebb-Tide Pool we found his boat in waiting, and it was only a matter of a few strokes of the oar before we were aboard his brig, the *Revenge*.

As we drew alongside he jerked his head up to the name.

“Used to be the *Sailor’s Lass*,” he said.

The anchor was hauled in, and the dream of my life began. I was like a mad thing on board there. I couldn’t grow weary questioning the hands on the use of this and that, though they probably grew weary answering me. For the most part they were kindly enough, though they dashed my enthusiasm somewhat by their oaths and scolding. But they seldom laid hands on me. It may have been that they were afraid to do so knowing me under the protection of Dirk, a master to daunt the boldest. But I think too I was popular on my own account. I was hardy and bold, and could swarm a back-stay as easily as run up the ratlines. Also I was willing and eager to take my share of the work, and so relieved the lazier ones of many a climb aloft. And my precocity with the knife and pistol amused them, and I could talk of strange things when we lounged about the galley in the dog-watches which appealed to their sailor-sense of the mysterious.

For a few days the world was an enchanted play-ground. The sky was a serene blue, with here and there lazy woolly clouds floating over us like argosies from fairyland. The wind

was steady enough to swell the sails without rolling us boisterously amid toppling waves. And the water cutting away from the bows in a gush of leaping white, and foaming out in a double wake to either side; the slapping of the waves against the vessel, and spurting up in little fountains to the deck; the long racing lines of the rollers, glittering with innumerable greens and blues, and in the evening catching the colours of the west and flaming suddenly into orange and red and purple; the mist on the sea’s face in the morning, like a white veil filmy and shifting and translucent, and gleaming like cloudy mother-of-pearl as the sun strengthened and shot it through with

colour, to furl it up like a banner of gauze till it melted and left the skyline clear, so that once again to the sweep of the horizon were the dancing waters and the wide free kingdom of the air; all these things which were the wonder and beauty of the sea caught at my heart like a passion, till I thought I should like to live for ever amid this inconstant wavering mystery, this intangible fluctuant loveliness, which teased my spirit like a thirst and fired it like a wine.

But this has little to do with my story, though I should like to dilate on the joy of it all. For even when the sky clouded and the storm caught us, the thunder rolling ponderously overhead like a caravan of the giants, and the lightning stabbing at us out of the black heavens, ripping the clouds across in savage jagged gashes, I still exulted, being ignorant, and fighting on the high unsteady yards with the stiff kicking sails thought that life was a wonderful game.

But with familiarity, though I never lost my enthusiasm, I had leisure to return upon myself and take measure of the calamity which had befallen me. The fumes had cleared from my mind by now, and I began to understand that I should never see my father again. "He is dead, dead, dead!" was

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no longer an ominous knocking from without; it was a sorrow that had come to live with me for ever. My father, who had been my whole world to me! He had gone. And I had been longing to see him, counting the days, in an agony when the misadventure of the officers and the later misadventure at Sunset Towers had threatened to hold us apart. And yet, so malignant was the fate that had dogged us, it was at the very moment of reunion that the blow had been struck. It was an added pain to know that I hadn't even heard the last words of his love. They had been spoken to another, while I, blind in my rage, had forgotten him and left him to lie there, not even staying to staunch his wound. I had leisure to think of all this, and it was agony unspeakable while the mood lasted; but with the first of the morning, for it was usually at night-time that the dark humour caught me, I was out on deck and glorying in the shifting splendours of the dawn; for I was still a boy, eager, romantic and leaping to the call of beauty with an ardent and I think a poetic nature.

So the days passed.

I took no heed of where we were steering. At this time Dirk gave me a free hand, not attempting so soon to break me in to the stern discipline of the sea, consequently I wasn't called upon to take note of our course. So I was surprised one day when dropping anchor off shore Dirk lowered a boat, and getting in said to me, "Wull, you'd better keep close, kiddy. If they catch you hereabouts they mightn't be kind to you."

I looked questionably at the land, and asked, "Why, where are we?"

"Ho," he laughed, "you're a fine sailor, Tommy, my lad, I'd a thought you'd a known the Rancey."

"The Rancey!" I exclaimed.

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And sure enough there was the channel running into the land. But I had never been as far as the mouth before.

A sudden desire set my heart thumping. I had hardly given a thought to Jenny during the whole of the voyage. But I knew now by the uneasy catching of my breath that a strange longing for her had suddenly possessed me.

"Dirk," I cried, "take me with you."

"Orders!" he said sharply. "You stay here."

"Dirk," I cried again coaxingly.

He merely looked at me, and I knew I mustn't argue with him. So I watched him lower away with a couple of hands and row off to shore.

The thought of Jenny set my heart strangely working. Though I knew well I badly wanted to see her, yet there was a shrinking uneasiness at my heart as though I were half afraid. The prospect of facing Jenny again seemed more like an ordeal than a pleasure. Yet I wanted her, and was tempted to put all to the hazard, dive in and swim to shore, and go and find her. It wasn't so much the fear of disobeying Dirk that made me hesitate as the knowledge that I hadn't yet accomplished my mission, indeed didn't seem to have made the first step in its accomplishment. I was ashamed to go to Jenny and say I had done exactly nothing, and in fact didn't know what to do.

However, the desire to see her grew intense. Perhaps she would forgive me when I told her of my father's death. And at that thought I felt a longing for sympathy, so that the tears came to my eyes and I blubbered like a girl. But I couldn't restrain the shaking sobs, and crept into hiding so that I shouldn't be seen. All I knew was that I was lonely and miserable, and I

wanted Jenny to comfort me. But the only consolation I had was the golden guinea she had given me. I

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pierced it, and threading it with a piece of twine hung it about my neck like a charm.

I waited for Dirk to return, intending to ask him again to let me go ashore. But he didn't return, and the evening grew dark, and the sun set over the land. So I crept into my bunk, and still sniffing a little curled myself up and went to sleep. But with the morning Dirk was still away. And then I suddenly knew why he had vanished, and cursed myself for a fool for not having guessed before. He was on the track of the King's Man. Probably he would be away some days. In any case if he captured the fellow it would have to be at night time. I would be safe for the day then. I gobbled down some breakfast and taking my knife, but leaving my pistol behind, I slipped on deck and waited for a chance to drop overboard unobserved.

It wasn't long before the chance came. The men were resting, as there was little work to do while the ship lay at anchor. The lookout wasn't paying too much heed to his job. I was over the side, sliding down the anchor chain, without a soul being any the wiser. And soon I was ashore, and making for a fisherman's hut changed my wet clothes for a jersey and a pair of breeches, on the understanding that I should return that night and receive my own clothes back again. I remember feeling a touch of shame at the untidy ill-fitting gear I had been obliged to borrow, but there was no alternative, for I couldn't wait for my own things to dry. So I set off, making tracks across country for Sunset Towers.

It was a longer journey than I had anticipated; but I obtained a lift here and there, and before the sun had set I had crept into the grounds from the back, and was scouting for a clear run in. For now that I was at the old haunt again my fear of the officers returned upon me.

For a while I lay low watching and listening, hoping that

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chance would send Jenny my way. I was sentimental enough to wonder whether she would instinctively divine my presence. I half expected her to come creeping to me with my name on her lips. But either fate was very

perverse or Jenny's instinct very dull; for she didn't come. So it was for me to go to her.

I ran across the bare space which divided me from the ruins, and was soon in among shelter again, climbing and threading my way through the tumble-down stonework to the main part of the building. I entered through the archway at the top of the main stairs, for I found the boarding loose as though some one had been there before me. But perhaps it had never been properly replaced since it had been opened for Worthing. I couldn't remember. I didn't stay to question the matter. I was so near now to my goal that all my mind was concentrated on the coming meeting. Jenny would be there, a room or two away, or perhaps just downstairs at her supper. I listened, but couldn't hear a sound. I decided I would break in upon her assuming her to be in her room. If she were downstairs after all I would hide and wait for her.

I crept across the landing to her room and laid my hand on the door-knob. It creaked, and I thought I heard a movement within. I listened, but all was still again. But I dared not enter at once, for the thought of what awaited me on the other side made my heart leap stupidly. I could almost see Jenny standing there with wide eyes waiting for the door to open. I was obliged to stand still to recover my composure, for my brain seemed to reel and I felt half choked with excitement, deafened by the beating of my heart. Why the meeting with Jenny should throw me into such an unnerved trembling, I didn't know; for I wasn't old enough to analyse my emotions. But there I stood, fluttering like a rag, with all the

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strength ebbed out of my muscles, and knowing full well that if I tried to speak I should merely stammer like a booby. Also I was painfully aware of my disreputable clothes.

It was the sound of some one moving downstairs that decided me to risk my appearance and enter. I turned the handle and put my head round the door. To my amazement the room was empty. I was both relieved and disappointed. For though the sight of Jenny there would have left me merely gaping and grinning inanely, yet I knew now I should have to prepare myself for the ordeal all over again. I went in and sat down on a chair, and looked about the room. It was strangely empty. Usually there were clothes lying here and there, for Jenny wasn't the tidiest of mortals. And besides there used to be all sorts of odds and ends and gimcracks that I

couldn't name dotted about the walls and shelves, and their absence now left a gap in the place. I went to the bed and pulled aside the curtain. The clothes and mattress were rolled up into a bundle. Evidently no one was expected to sleep there that night. I looked blankly around me, feeling bitterly dejected, and knowing, in spite of silly arguments that kept rising to the contrary, that Jenny wasn't there at all. She had gone away. I began to notice other signs of abandonment. The dust lay thickly everywhere. There were odds and ends of paper lying untidily about the floor as though drawers and cupboards had been turned out. As indeed they had been; for when I examined them they were empty.

I sat down on the bed, disheartened and disconsolate. I didn't realize till this moment how keenly I had been looking forward to seeing Jenny. And the stupid trembling left me, and I felt limp with dejection. Again I was alone in the world. And with the sense of loneliness came back in a flood of anguish the memory of my father's death. I was too utterly

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broken to weep even. I just sat there looking dully before me, saying to myself, "Jenny, Jenny, Jenny! ..."

Then I felt a surge of anger against her. Why had she gone away? Gone away without even leaving me a message! Perhaps she had left a message! With quickened feelings I sprang up and gazed about the room, then started turning out all the drawers. Before I had merely glanced idly at them. But though I hunted high and low there was no trace of any message. I even examined the dusty shelves, wondering whether she had thought to write on them with her finger, till it occurred to me that the dust had gathered after she had left. Then I thought there might be a note for me downstairs, or even in my own bedroom.

I turned to the door, but again I heard a noise; and I hesitated. There was somebody on the landing. Instinct told me it was my enemy, for who else should be prowling round the place when the inmates had gone?

For a moment my thought was to fling open the door and hurl myself upon him. I gripped my knife in angry hate, and my hand was on the knob. But the spasm of fury passed, and I felt limp and unnerved again. Somehow I knew the creature was waiting for me outside the door. All was very still but I seemed to feel a presence there just behind the panels. He must be standing motionless, listening, holding his breath, even as I was doing myself; and only that inch of woodwork divided us. But I hadn't the

courage to open the door and put all to the hazard. The evening was growing dusky; already the room was full of hovering shadows. If only it had been daylight, I told myself; but all the while I knew I was a coward. Yet I couldn't stiffen my resolution. Indeed the blow of Jenny's absence with no word of where I was to find her had reduced me to a stupid self-pity, and I had no spirit left for fight.

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I slunk quietly away, treading with an infinitude of caution; and reaching the window I raised it as noiselessly as I could. Luckily enough it yielded easily to my hands, sliding up quietly without a creak. Every moment I dreaded to see the door flung open, and my enemy upon me. But I kept my knife in my teeth, ready; and always my eyes were turned towards the door.

At length the window was raised, and with a great breath of relief I slipped out and over the edge, clinging to the ivy. And then as my face dipped below the sill I saw the message I had been hunting for. A card was wedged into a crack in the stone-work; dirty it is true, and torn, but bearing across it in uneven straggling capitals my own name, though the last letter was missing as the card had been torn away in a ragged slant as though some one had snatched at it in haste only ripping off a corner.

Carefully, though I was still in an agony of fear, I loosened the card, and climbing down to earth I turned it over without waiting to hide. And there I saw written, "Tommy, come to me. Our house is ..."

But the precious fragment that alone was of value to me had gone.

I stood gazing at the dirty card with the untidy writing, turning it over and over, wondering what it meant. Why had Jenny hung out this summons for me, and then torn off the heart of the message? "Tommy, come to me." I read that again and again, mechanically, till I seemed to hear the high imperious voice speaking the summons. And with the feeling of Jenny's nearness I realized how like her it was to put the message outside her window, as though she knew I should climb in that way. I reproached myself for not having done so. If I had done so I might have found the card intact.

That set me thinking instead of sentimentalizing. Who had torn off that precious corner? At first I had thought that

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Jenny must have done so in some sudden changing whim. But now I said it couldn't have been Jenny. Then who? ... With a start I remembered having heard a movement in the room as I had stood outside the door foolishly talking down my thumping heart, too shy to face her. Suppose I had but repeated the manœuvre which my enemy had played on me? Suppose he too, hearing my hand on the knob, had climbed out through the window, and seeing the message there had snatched at it, in too great a hurry to release it carefully, and so had stolen just the fragment that I needed? It was possible. I flushed hotly at the possibility, for the explanation commended itself to me. And then the full meaning of the thing flooded in upon me. It wasn't my enemy. I must have been stupid ever to have supposed it could have been. It was the Captain's enemy. He was hunting for him. And now he would have the clue he wanted.

All fear was forgotten now. I was up the ivy again; and leaping to the door I flung it wide. The landing was empty. With my knife in my hand I rushed into room after room, then down the stairs, hunting everywhere. And assuredly I should have stabbed anyone that had come in my path without staying to see who he might be. But the whole place was deserted. Only the hollow echoing of my feet rang from chamber to chamber, sounding strangely dismal in the gathering twilight. So at last I gave up the search. Standing still there in the great empty hall the abandonment of the place was like a watchful presence as of some listening thing, so that I turned about expecting to see eyes upon me in the shadowy corners. At last I grew really frightened at I know not what, and ran into the open. When I turned to look back the huge house was standing up black against the sunset as I had seen it that evening when hand in hand my father and I had first passed

beneath its portals. And still it seemed to be rapt in some dark and evil meditation, gazing in upon itself as though concealing an ugly mystery which it dared not divulge. And I, knowing something of the haunting horror within its walls, and believing that even now an enemy was lurking there, felt an overshadowing dread at my heart as though an immense black bird had covered me with its wings. Then I heard a low sighing that swelled into a moan; and it seemed that the mighty creature were shaken with a sorrow it couldn't ease, crying to be rid of a sickness that was poisoning it

to the soul. I clapped my hands to my ears and fled into the darkening night.

It wasn't till I was deep among the heather that I realized I was famishingly hungry. I would have turned back, if I had had the courage, to see if there were any stale leavings in the larder. But I couldn't face the prospect of entering again that lonely dark mansion which seemed more menacing in its desolation than if I had been certain that an enemy was lurking for me there knife in hand. So I tightened my belt and lay down to sleep, and over my head the stars came out, sparkling like flakes of the driven surge in the splendour of the moon. So the night slipped over me and the morning came. With it I was up again, tightening my belt by another hole to kennel in the wolves of hunger that were gnawing so remorselessly within me.

However, I soon struck upon a cart-track, and reaching a farmstead was able to appease my appetite, and so set forth once more, strengthened and invigorated. When clear of Rancey Bridge, for the fear of the officers still made me cautious, I hit out for the main road, obtaining a lift here and there on the way. But it was well towards evening before I heard the washing of the sea, and at last set foot upon the shore.

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I broke out on to the open sands without caution, and before I could retrieve my error I saw Dirk in front of me. I started back into hiding, but I heard his voice call me sharply. I went slowly up to him, hanging my head, for he had discovered my truancy, and I feared he would be bitterly angry with me.

Without a word he gripped me savagely by the arm and strode me down to his boat where it tossed at anchor at the water's edge.

"My clothes," I said, not wanting to be stranded with the ragged things I had on.

He said no word, but pushed me forward. And there in the boat lay my own clothes in a bundle. Then he knew all about my escapade.

I was dismissed to my bunk immediately we arrived on board. I heard the anchor hauled in, and the sails run up, and felt the wind take the canvas and swing us out to sea.

I was troubled at Dirk's silence. I expected him to be angry with me, for I had disobeyed him. I knew too that I should be punished. But he seemed more than angry, as though I had done him a personal injury. Well, the

morning would bring forth what it might. I was used to living in the hour, and I was soon asleep, rocked by the swaying of the brave ship as she rose to the waves and cut through the furrows.

In the morning I was tied to the mast, and had my first taste of the rope's end. But I knew it was only just, and though the pain was terrible I bore Dirk no ill will. When I was released he sent for me, and looking me steadily in the eyes, said, "Wull, Tommy, kid, that's that. You've lost me a precious day. He's not in this quarter no longer. I must seek elsewhere. But you've given him a start."

I began to protest my repentance, but he cut in, "You've taken your gruelling. Here's my hand."

CHAPTER XXIV

THOMAS GARTH PLAYDEN

IT was in London itself where I next set foot on land. Dirk marched me away to a riverside lodging where he seemed well known, and handing me some money gave me my freedom for the day, but told me to return without fail every evening at six, for he didn't know when he would need to be under way again. I promised faithfully not to fail him, and he merely gave my arm a little extra squeeze as he repeated his command, knowing quite well, I think, that I had learnt my lesson too thoroughly to put myself in fault any more.

So I trotted away to find Worthing. But what with the wonder of the new sights, the strange confusion of the streets, the stupefying hubbub of the traffic and the crowds, it was a long time before I reached the city and hunted out the office of Worthing's uncle. And even then I was afraid to enter. Everything within looked so neat and orderly, though dismally dark and stuffy, that I became acutely conscious of my ungainly seafaring apparel, though I was no longer dressed in the jersey of the fisherman's boy. But about this time I began to be aware of my own appearance, and felt a confused shame if my clothes didn't sit well upon me. So I peeped within, and then looked down at myself, realizing how my wrists stuck out from the short sleeves of my jacket; and I was ashamed to enter. I slunk away, but presently coming across a clothier's,

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after long hesitation and much passing and repassing of the stall, I at length made the plunge and demanded a suit of shore-going apparel. That led to a visit to a barber's where reluctantly I sacrificed my incipient sailor pigtail which I had begun to cultivate with romantic zest.

However, all this is rather needless detail. I soon found myself trimmed up in a costume that satisfied my sense of the elegant and the decorous, and returning to the office didn't hesitate this time, but boldly marching in asked if I might see Worthing Bright. I was shown into a tiny inner room where I saw my friend perched up at a ridiculously high desk, a quill behind his ear, and busily scanning an imposing document. In the moment before he turned round I inhaled such a lungful of musty air smelling of

dust and damp and old leather that I wondered how he could remain there more than five minutes without being sick.

At the announcement of my name he pivoted round on his stool, and at the sight of me dropped the document to the desk, and jumped to the floor. In a trice we were shaking each other by the hand, beaming our joy at the reunion.

It was lunch-time, so Worthing whisked me away to an ordinary, and over a savoury pie and a mug of porter we chatted of our doings. At least I did, for Worthing didn't have much to say for himself, though I managed to screw from him the story of the way he had rescued me from Rancey Bridge. He was able to laugh at the affair now, though something of the indignity he had suffered still seemed to rankle at his pride. But all I learnt fresh was that being in the confidence of the Doctor he had discovered where my knife and pistol were kept, and so had been able to steal them and bring them to me. He added no comment; and the rest I knew.

He shrugged at the affair, and dismissed it; but he was

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excited at my own particular business. However, he soon calmed down to his usual sedate self-control, and told me something of his progress in the solution of the mystery. He had been going into the whole affair, and his uncle was as keen as himself to unravel the thing, and was absent even then following up the clue; and though he wouldn't give me particulars he hinted that the matter was taking on a proportion that promised to make it of unique interest in the history of crime. "In fact, Tommy," he said, "I'm afraid your dad's very much in the background. We're after higher game."

All this wasn't of much comfort to me. I felt a little hurt that Worthing could so far forget my loss in the mere thrill of the legal triumph that he declared lay before him. But I knew his nature. The human counted for little, the legal for much. Indeed, apart from his friendship with me I don't think he had a tie to bind him to humanity.

He had set my own personal affairs in order, I soon found. My father had left, not a fortune indeed, but a competence which with husbanding would yield an income sufficient to guarantee independence. So at least Worthing assured me, though the figures which he set down for me in orderly columns conveyed exactly nothing to me. I asked him to look after the whole thing, and to let me have money when I wanted it. As for me, I intended to study seamanship under Dirk.

At this Worthing frowned slightly as though considering the matter; then drawing out a document he studied it carefully, and at last said that he thought that would do. It seemed that my father had stipulated that I was to apprentice myself to some profession, or, if I preferred, to continue at school till I was seventeen and then proceed to a university. But the thought of a scholastic career for a fellow like myself sent me into a roar of laughter.

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I needn't detail all the legal business that had to be transacted. There were documents to sign of whose contents I was blissfully ignorant, and lawyers and magistrates to visit; but Worthing steered me safely through the confusing processes. I remembered how my father had said that Worthing was the kind of fellow to have for a friend. Evidently his dying thought turning towards me had been that Worthing would care for me if he left the whole matter in his hands. The matter was tangled enough too; for my father had no discoverable relations, and there seemed some difficulty in proving my identity. His money had been left in a lump sum at a goldsmith's who knew no more of him than his face and his signature. When in need of funds my father had called personally and taken what he wanted from the store. However, at last I found myself master of the inheritance, and entrusting it to Worthing was assured that I might count on a yearly income of a few hundred pounds; for he invested the money for me, and saw the deeds safely banked in my name.

He also handed me some papers of my father's: fragments of poems and stories for the most part, which I laid aside to examine at my leisure.

The most curious thing to me was the discovery that I really had a name. Of course at school I had had an appendage dangling in the rear of Tommy, but I had paid little heed to it, and cannot now remember what it was. Now I found I had a real name of my own, and felt extraordinarily elated at the discovery. I could sign myself Thomas Garth Playden.

But amazing as this discovery was, it was even more amazing to learn that my father, who hadn't even had a Christian name that I knew of, had been Walter Noel Playden, Esq. I couldn't reconcile myself to it. It seemed so utterly foolish to think of my father otherwise than as Daddy. He was associated

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in my mind with everything romantic and mysterious, and should have been nameless to the end of time. To fix him with a title like this was to strip him of the glamour that had always clouded him about like a glory. He was no longer an emanation from the pages of a wonderful tale, but merely a creature of flesh and blood who clothed himself like another and fed on bread and meat. It was indeed the first blow levelled at the illusions that had clung about my childhood. With a name of my own, and with a father who also had his individual title, I took my first step out of Fairyland into the world of men and women.

CHAPTER XXV

JENNY SENDS A MESSAGE

MY affairs were hardly settled before I was whirled away to sea again. One day when I reached my lodging a minute before the stroke of six, puffing, for I had been running so as not to be late, I found a message from Dirk bidding me to make haste aboard. I gathered up my few belongings and ran for the quay, and it wasn't many minutes after my clambering aboard that the anchor was hauled in and we were under way. I learnt next day from Dirk that he had just missed his quarry again. I thought I detected a suggestion of an accusation in his voice, and I cried out, "Oh, Dirk, I'm so sorry."

"Tush, kid, that business is settled," he said sharply.

But I believed that if it hadn't been for my disobedience on the Rancey he would have run his man to earth by now. However, it seemed that he had escaped. He had even left the country, and Dirk couldn't hazard a guess where he might be bound for.

"Slippery he is," said Dirk. "Knows all the tricks, and a few more besides. But I'll have him, Tommy, I'll have him."

I don't think I was very enthusiastic for Dirk's success. The matter left me rather cold. And yet I myself was bound, not on one quest of vengeance, but on two. There was my pledge to Jenny to fulfill; though how in the world I was to fulfill it I didn't know. And there was my father's murderer to hunt down, though Worthing seemed to have shouldered the responsibility for that.

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It was a strange position that often set me fretfully brooding. I was but a boy, with a nature naturally responding to affection and gaiety and beauty, yet with the burden of two lives upon me that I was to track down and destroy. At times I felt that the thing was too absurd. I was under a delusion. Even my father's death began to grow unreal, till I wondered whether I hadn't merely dreamed the whole fantastic thing. I should have been glad enough to have awakened one morning to find it had all been a nightmare, and that my real life was just this wonder of sea-beauty about me, as the ship sped on day after day like a white bird, driving down into

the south, with the skies growing bluer and bluer, till their wealth of colour was like a solemn song at my heart, very deep and holy.

Indeed, I gave myself up to the delight of this wonderful new world that was opening around me. I think I was an apt pupil, and Dirk was pleased enough with my progress; and more pleased with my behaviour, I believe, for I was able to take my share of duty with the men, though naturally I was treated with more leniency and consideration. And for my part I was thankful to Dirk for setting me to labour with the rest, rather than spoiling me as though I were either too small, or too much of a gentleman to soil my hands. It wasn't long before I could stow a royal single-handed, or do my trick at the wheel with the best.

But I mustn't dwell on this, for the brig *Revenge* was all this while bearing me away from the real scene of my story. Indeed, the story of this time is Dirk's rather than mine, though there would be enough to fill a book if it weren't clean out of the course of my narrative. Suffice it to say that I grew bigger and stronger and browner. Also for some months I was strangely subject to moods which puzzled even myself.

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For though knowing I was behaving badly I would for days at a stretch have no word for a soul on board, often scowling at Dirk himself, when my heart was longing for the rough and kindly converse that was customary between us. Sometimes too I felt forced against my will to speak glumly and even angrily, for there seemed to be a stupid crying at my heart, and I was mortally afraid that a kind word would set me blubbering. So in self-defence I gave sharp words that sharp words might be returned. At night when I was curled up in my blankets I would sometimes cry myself to sleep, cursing myself for a baby, but unable to restrain my tears. For at times a desolating sense of loneliness overpowered me; the image of my father would rise before me, and I would stretch out my arms to him to clasp but a mocking emptiness of air. And then I would rock myself upon my bunk, that the noise might cover the sound of my sobbing; and my thoughts would turn to Jenny, and with the memory of her I would feel vaguely comforted and sink to sleep.

However, these moods were transitory merely, and little by little I mastered them till gradually they became rare, and at last my spirit came out into the sunshine. But I have recorded them because I think they kept alive in me the fluttering purpose to be revenged upon my own and Jenny's

enemy. For it seemed to me that my sufferings were due to the cloud that had clung about my childhood. The shadow of fear had left my heart troubled and uncertain, and I felt there would be no real peace for me till the evil were rotted right out of my life. And with Jenny it was the same. Her life, too, would be perpetually darkened unless I could clear her path as well as my own of the gloom that lay upon it.

But my purpose became chastened from hate or revenge to one of duty, till I felt that whether I would or not my

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destiny would call and I would have to rise and meet it. So I kept my knife sharpened and my pistol primed, and practised daily at both weapons till hand and eye were as one thing working in unison.

And the days went by with sun and storm, and I increased in knowledge of sailor-craft and in love and understanding of the sea.

However, Dirk's quest didn't seem to prosper. Watching his lips at their continual and ominous chewing it seemed to me that he was repeating to himself that old vow of his: "I'll follow him to the end of the world, but I'll have his heart's blood." It seemed to me in my ignorance that the end of the world couldn't be very far away. For we passed from port to port always making south, and at length bore off for the Cape and the stormy eastern seas. I saw the shores of India and walked the streets of her bazaars, and learnt much of foreign ports and ways. But always I saw Dirk's face grow darker with the evil purpose at his heart still baulked and frustrated. I wondered if I, too, should come to wear such a weight of gloom upon my brow before I had accomplished my quest. Then unaccountably we bore back upon our tracks and steered for home, Dirk still hot upon the trail, though what the clue might be which he was following I couldn't guess, nor did I greatly care to question. So with the passing of the winter and the coming of the spring we were back in European waters, and steered one morning into the bay of Naples.

And here my own story began again, for I came upon Picardino, who had wandered home to his native land.

I had just made the purchase of a fine stiletto, and was seated in a tavern sipping wine while I admired the tapering steel, when I heard a voice suddenly break out into a ripple of song, and immediately I remembered the minstrel of the

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Snow Man. I slipped the stiletto under my waist-cloth, and turning cried, "Picardino!"

He actually stopped in his singing, and leaping towards me smothered me with kisses, chattering his delight in such a race of mingled English and Italian that I could scarcely follow a word of it, but guessed at the meaning by the profuse and ardent embraces he treated me to.

It was some while before I could tear myself free. For the first ouslaught over he gazed at me for a moment, and then with a cry of "Leetle Tommee!" returned to the attack.

Then he whisked me away to another tavern and up a dark flight of stairs to a little room, evidently his lodging, into which he ushered me as though I were a duke, bowing for me to enter. At length we were seated, pledging each other in execrable wine, clinking glasses, and drinking with faces almost touching. And nothing would satisfy him but that I must tell my story. Where had I gone that night? What had I been doing? And so on and so forth.

I told him as much as I thought he should know, merely referring to my father by saying he was dead.

"Dead! Ahh!" he exclaimed, clapping a hand to his heart. "Yess, in the fierr. That sad. And he such an arteest! Yess, how he play upon the gueetarr! And you desolate, yess. How I see eet." Once more he flung his arms about me and cried, "Ah, leetle Tommee, how you desolate! You come with Picardino, yess?"

But I told him I was a sailor; and then he would have the story of my wanderings. So I told him of Dirk, and how he was caring for me and training me; though of course I said nothing of the purpose of our voyage. I hinted that Dirk had been trading, which indeed was true too, for Dirk had made it part of my education to show me about the booths

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and markets of the East, and I had a stock of purchases on board by which I hoped materially to increase my capital.

Then it was my turn to question Picardino, but so vigorously did he ply me for more details of my life that it was no easy matter to edge in a word about himself. However, at length I did manage to say, "Tell me, Picardino, where did you vanish that night? And who was it chasing you?"

"Ah, Tommee"—he smiled knowingly—"that secret."

Then he leant forward, and whispering very quietly as though the affair were a profound mystery he said, "Picardino know manee thing. He travell heer and theer. Ladees they say heem, 'You speak my sweetheart thees and that,' and papas they angree. Yess, and eef they catch heem eet ees no pleasant for Picardino. But he plentee love the ladees. Ah, the sweet theengs they arre! He geeve much to caree message. Yess, eef eet were hees blood."

He laid his hands across his heart with a theatrical gesture that amused me; and yet he seemed earnest enough in his story. The picture of the little minstrel wandering from hall to hall, carrying love-message from sweetheart to sweetheart and evading the wrath of enraged papas was one that flattered my sense of the romantic.

He continued his story by telling me of all the wiles that the ladies resorted to in getting their messages through to him, sometimes humming a song that told its own tale, sometimes tossing him a coin with a name scratched into it, sometimes speaking to him in the language of flowers. It was amusing enough, and indeed I found a strange charm in the sentimental glamour of his amorous adventures. He coloured his stories with such an impassioned glow of whole-hearted appreciation that I was carried off my feet, and wished that I too had a message for him to carry to my sweetheart, or better still one

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to receive from him from the lady of my love, imprisoned in a lonely tower by a tyrannous papa.

However, it seemed that he wasn't always successful. He began to wax melancholy because occasionally he failed to find some lost or erring swain and bring him back to his lady-love. Even then he was in search for more than one faithless truant, and he began to tell me of this and that disloyal one he was still hunting for. Then of a sudden he broke off, and looking at me in a strange enquiring way said, "Tommee! Why, yess, eet was Tommee. But you grown. She say a leetle boy. You beeg as Picardino; beeger. Ah, yess, I not theenk."

Before I was aware of what he was about he brushed his hand across my forehead and smoothed back my hair, crying out with delight as he did so, "Yess, eet ees. The scarr, as she say. Tommee, I have message for you."

I was thrown into a violent flutter of emotion. It was so unexpected, so incredible. That we should have been tossed together like this, I from the

East and he from the North, was strange enough in itself; but that he should have a message for me, a message from Jenny, was a wonder beyond belief.

“Tell me,” I said, hardly able to form the words.

But before he would speak I had to endure his winks and nods and smiles and sighing innuendoes of “Ah, the leetle boy! But he man of the worrld! He have sweethearrr! Ah, that ees preetty, yess!”

But at last he told me the story. He had made a second visit to the “beeg house” on the moors, in spite of his vow never to go near it again. He shuddered as he mentioned the haunted place. However, this time he had been civilly welcomed; and by his description of the Captain with his kind fierce eyes, and of the “leetle gerrl with the voice of a queen,” I knew he wasn’t deceiving me. “And the leetle ladee ...”

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“Jenny,” I cried.

“Jenny,” he repeated. “Ah, that ees right. She send message to leetle boy with scarr under the hairr. I say, ‘Where I find heem?’ She say, ‘Hees name Tommee; you ask.’ I shrug shoulderr and take message, for I no can say no. She so decided leetle gerrl.”

I laughed at the picture, for it was so like Jenny. She had sent me forth on my quest in the same way, without a thought as to how I might possibly succeed.

Picardino seemed to understand me, for he smiled and said, “Ah, you know the mannerr, yess. But when she say Tommee I not think of my Tommee. That foolish of me.”

I can’t report in full the rigmarole he treated me to. The heart of the message was that I was to seek out Jenny in London. In London! I must have been near her then before I had set out on this voyage. She wanted me. I was to go to her at once. And the precious address was supplied.

At once! That was a year ago. In a dim dismay I wondered whether Jenny would forgive me for deserting her so long. It seemed difficult to make excuses to her.

However, she wanted me. I was in a glow of expectation at that. She wanted me. And I was bound for England now, I believed. I would go to her without delay. Eagerly I pressed Picardino for fresh details of my little sweetheart, for I understood now the meaning of all the strange turbulent shyness of the past year. I was a man of the world, as Picardino had said. I had learnt something of the ways of men and women. And I knew that the

fermenting uneasiness that the thought of Jenny had aroused in me meant merely that I loved her.

So with a heart in a maze of wonder and delight I took my leave of Picardino, even returning his embraces with effusion.

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So kindly did I feel towards the world that when I plunged into the darkness of the night which had caught me unawares I tossed a silver coin to a whining beggar-woman who was crouching at the tavern door. My generosity seemed to overwhelm her, for she clutched my hand and kissed it fervently, and then opening my palm wide to the light of the flaring lamp in the porch she rattled off into a long list of blessings that awaited me on my journey through life. But I was in a hurry, for I had overstayed my time. I wrenched my hand free, for she was gripping it tightly and studying it intently. As I broke from her I thought she glanced keenly at me as though there were some fate in store for me which she didn't care to foretell. But I thought nothing of it and sped on my way, repeating over and over the address Picardino had given me, and fingering Jenny's coin beneath my jacket.

I threaded my way through the twisting streets, hardly knowing where I was wandering. Something of that strange elation I had felt when waiting for my father seemed to possess my spirit. A wonderful sense of uplifting lightness buoyed me on and wafted me forward. I was going to meet my Jenny!

I came out upon the shore, and for a moment gazed to right and left to take my bearings. But just as I identified the brig *Revenge* lying out white and ghostly on the dark waters, I felt a numbing blow at my head. I didn't altogether lose my senses. I realized I was being bound, that a great cloth lay tight over my face. But I couldn't summon any strength to resist my captor. I was hauled away by the shoulders, my legs trailing in the sand, and soon I found myself being lifted on board a little rowing-boat where a second figure helped to secure me in the stern. There I sat trussed up and helpless while the boat was rowed out into the bay.

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CHAPTER XXVI

A STORY UNDER THE STARS

AT first I thought I was merely the victim of some common cutthroats who were after my money. It wasn't a pleasing thought. I felt indignant rather than afraid; for after the adventures I had passed through it seemed too stupid to die at the hands of vulgar robbers. And something of my old outcry against fate rose to my heart.

However, I was soon undeceived. When we had rowed out some way my captors dropped anchor, and the boat lay idly rising and falling on the gentle heave of the waters. For some minutes there was a whispered consultation between the two men, while I had leisure mazedly to admire the dancing brilliance of the stars high up in the black pool of the sky; and then with reviving clearness of mind as the effects of the blow passed off, leaving only a throbbing pain at my head, I turned my eyes to the men and took stock of the couple. One was a little fellow; the other though not large was bigger than his companion. They both wore masks, and in the darkness of the night it was impossible to distinguish anything of their features. I thought too they could distinguish little of mine, for the gag over my mouth reached below my chin and almost up to my eyes, just allowing me to see.

Presently the larger of the two reached forward to me, and seizing my right hand forced it open; then holding it to the light of a little lantern that stood in the bottom of the boat he beckoned to the other fellow and pointed to my palm.

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It was then that I realized that this was no mere robbery. For it was the two ragged scars of the jetty nails that they were so carefully examining. The little fellow nodded. They trussed me up again with my hands behind me, and slipped back to their places, sitting side by side on a thwart facing me. For a while there was silence.

I felt quite easy in mind now, for I knew I had been captured by mistake. Somehow I had been arrested for my father's murderer. I thought that the worst that could come of it would be a waste of time; for sooner or later they were bound to find out who I really was. I made one desperate struggle to force a cry through my gag, and I strained violently at my

bonds; but it was unavailing. I knew I should have to wait till the gag was removed, and then I could rectify the error. Meanwhile I sat quietly, trying to possess my soul in patience.

The bigger man leant forward, and seemed by his attitude to be steadily gazing at me through his mask. Something in the way in which he turned his face to me, though I could only see the lower half of it, sent my mind back to the old beggar-woman who had tried to tell my fortune at the tavern porch. Then the man began to speak. And though now he spoke in a clear and precise English, whereas the old woman had gabbled in a sort of nasal Italian, yet there was something in the pitch and intonation of the voice which confirmed my surmise. This was none other than the old beggar-woman herself. Now, of course, it was clear how the mistake had arisen, especially as the porch had only been dimly lit by the swinging lamp, and my face was tanned out of recognition by the southern sun. But it still seemed a strange coincidence that I should have stumbled right into the trap that had evidently been laid for another.

“I am going to tell you a story,” he said.

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I didn’t think he would be able to tell me anything I didn’t already know; but there was nothing for it but to sit still and listen, though I wished mightily he would ungag me and let me reveal my identity; for it was clear that all this while the real murderer was gaining precious time.

But the next words sent my mind spinning in a vortex of alarming doubt.

“There were three brothers,” the clear voice continued. “The eldest we will call”—he repeated with emphasis—“we will *call*—Captain Field.”

There was a pause; I supposed for the significance of the words to sink into my mind.

“You see,” continued the man, “I intend to convince you that I know the meaning of those marks upon your hand, and that if you still have any love for your own skin you will put yourself at my service. And remember, though walls have ears, the waves have none. We are as private here as in the grave. However, the story will speak for itself. We will begin with Captain Field.”

I was all attention, straining to sift his words and catch the underlying significance of it all.

He went on: “There is a certain haunted house on the northern moors that you and I know well. It was there that the Captain,” he stressed the title

with a slight sneer, “first discovered the manuscript which told of the winning and burying of the accursed treasure. That part of the story I needn’t relate. For proof that I know it, if that is of any consequence, here is the document itself.”

He held out his hand to the little fellow beside him who brought the document out from under his cloak and gave it to him. He laid it out before me, slowly turning the pages so that I might satisfy myself that it was the genuine thing.

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As I stretched at my bonds to gaze at it I knew that the horrible doubt that had seized me at the mention of the Captain’s name was the very truth: it was my father’s murderer who had stolen the manuscript that lay before me, and it must be my father’s murderer who now sat facing me telling me this story. So I hadn’t been captured by mistake. Rather the sign that was to have betrayed my enemy had betrayed me instead. I wondered what the condition would be which was to save me from these men. I listened with all my attention, hoping I might discover some missing link in the narrative which would give me the advantage of them; for I surmised there must be something they wanted to know which only I could tell. If I were clever enough to find the weak point in their information I might foil them yet.

The man continued: “You are satisfied, I presume, that this is the real article. How it has come into my hands you needn’t seek to enquire.” I thought I knew that well enough without pondering the matter. “I say the Captain found this at the haunted house. Where he found it you probably know. In a certain dark passage of which you are well aware there is a skeleton chained to a niche in the wall. How it came there is interesting enough in its way, but here the tale would be irrelevant. But when the Captain bought the house many years ago, *bought* it, you understand, though it seems he prefers to play the rôle of tenant rather than owner”—that was information to me, and I busily meditated it while still alertly listening—“when the Captain bought the house and accidentally discovered the passage I have mentioned, he found the document here hung about the neck of the unfortunate man whose bones only remained to tell of the agonies he had suffered. The Captain was interested in the document. But, when he first read it and learnt of the treasure which seemed

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to have borne such evil fruit as it were before his very eyes, his first thought was to destroy the thing. Why his intention altered we needn't enquire. Suffice it to say he took counsel with his two younger brothers, and they decided to search for the buried gold."

He took breath, and resumed: "A ship was purchased, a crew enrolled, and the search began. It was successful. Then what happened we needn't follow in detail. It may be that the treasure was really accursed. Of the band of twenty who looked upon it and handled it, actually winning for themselves a fortune to satisfy the avarice of the most grasping, only three survived. One was the Captain, one his servant, a boy of seventeen at the time; a foreign boy who loved the Captain as his own father, and would have shed his last drop of blood, as the saying is, to serve him." Here the man's voice became unusually impressive as though wishing to drive his point home. As for me, I knew he was speaking of Abou. "And the third was the Captain's youngest brother."

He paused and added, "His favourite brother," and continued, "Whether there had been a quarrel or not we won't seek to enquire. It is enough to say that the brother escaped with a fatal wound in the neck, but carrying with him this manuscript." He tapped it with his finger. "He had been stabbed; and as I say the wound was fatal. But before he died he succeeded in swimming to land and hiding in a cave, where he was found by a young lad who tried to staunch his wound, and would have taken him to shelter. But he died where he lay, having first given the document to the boy, telling him to preserve it as he valued riches and happiness.

"What happened to the dead man doesn't concern us. The boy took the document and learnt its secret. He became a man, and in his turn made search for the gold. His name, we

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will say, was Playden—Walter Noel Playden, to be exact."

Here there was a pause while the eyes of both men seemed fixed on me in keen scrutiny. For my part I had already summed up the situation and could have finished the story for them. I had been watching the smaller of the two, though listening to the other; for there seemed to me something familiar in the curl of his lips. I tried to connect them in my mind with the memories I had of the face of my father's murderer, but wasn't altogether successful. Yet I thought the resemblance was strong enough, seeing I had never had a clear view of the fellow. I had only seen him by the leaping

firelight, again in the dim glimmer of the moon, and lastly with my senses failing when he had struck me by the jetty. And now there were only the stars, the lights from the town across the water, and the lantern in the boat, to discover him to me; and even so only the lower part of his face was visible.

The thought in my mind was that this was Bite-in-the-Dark, and the larger man who seemed to have the matter in hand was Shadow-of-Fear himself.

He resumed in a lower and more impressive voice:

“So you see there were only two who knew the secret; for we needn’t count the servant. He was merely a part of his master’s will. And then”—again he paused—“Playden was killed. He was *stabbed, in the neck.*” He seemed to intend me to understand something particular by this. “And the manuscript vanished. Here it is.”

The conclusion was obvious. He might have said, “Here is the murderer.”

Again there was silence for a while, as they fixed me with their eyes from behind their masks. Then I began to be aware of something happening behind me. For a little time now there had been a sort of gentle tugging at my bonds, but

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I had hardly noticed it as my mind had been given to the story. But now in the space of silence I grew keenly conscious of it. There was something furtive in the twitching of the cords at my wrists, very much as though a rat were gnawing at them. Indeed for half a minute I wondered whether Providence were coming to my aid, for I had heard of prisoners being miraculously freed in such a way. But the hope was too wild to be credited.

Then the man before me began to speak again, and my mind was torn between his words, which I knew I must follow with all my wits, and the silent movements behind me which I couldn’t understand, but which vaguely alarmed me by their secrecy and stealth.

“But the manuscript, as you know, is now only half a key. It is old and torn, and there is a vital portion missing.” He turned to the map and pointed to the spot which had puzzled my father. “Even Playden never unravelled the mystery though he searched for twenty years.”

At that moment I felt a hand touch mine. It was immediately withdrawn. The hand was cold, and the touch had been but a fractional pressure; but it

was enough. I knew there was somebody there behind me; in the water it must be, for I was in the very stern of the boat. A horrible fear caught at my heart. It was bad enough to be held in captivity with my father's enemy in the lantern-light there before me; but this subtle, unseen creature, feeling up at me out of the dark water, was a thing to shake my nerve with a sense of inscrutable forces at work to undermine me unawares. I could scarcely concentrate my attention on the vital business in hand. But I must listen perforce, though with half my mind alert for the movements of that unknown presence at my back.

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The voice was speaking again: "You will either supply me with the missing clue, or"—he spoke with an ominous emphasis—"you will pay the penalty which the sign on your hand warrants."

Still there was a stealthy jogging at my wrists. Casting desperately in my mind for what it could mean, and half afraid every moment to feel a knife in my back, I yet had a thought to give to the words of my captor. It all seemed clear to me now. Worthing had been right in his surmise, though he hadn't suspected the connection between my father's fate and the persecution of the Captain. It was a common enemy, I knew now, who being himself on the scent of the treasure knew that he needed both the manuscript which my father had possessed and the clue which only the Captain could supply, as he had already threaded the maze and stolen a share of the gold. But I was still in the dark as to how I could serve the fellow's turn.

He resumed: "You have the choice. Behind you lies the shore and freedom; before you a sea-voyage and the forfeit at the end of it. I will give you two minutes to decide. I shall then ungag you and you will tell me the secret of the entrance. If you refuse you will be your own executioner."

He took out a heavy watch, and repeated, "I give you two minutes."

I was in an agony. Clearly he thought I knew the secret because I had lived with the Captain. He seemed to know I had once penetrated to the secret chamber; probably he presumed I had then learnt the answer to the riddle. My mind was in a maze. All I could see clearly was that I was in danger of sharing the fate of that wretched skeleton if I failed to satisfy the demands of these men. The forfeit. ... I shuddered, remembering my alarming experience in the passage. How

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was I to convince this man that I was as ignorant as himself?

Then I held my breath in sudden excitement, for I felt the cord at my right wrist slip loose. I moved my hand gently, and knew that it was free. The mystery of that strange presence in the water behind me was instantly clear. It was a friend. I didn't stop to think who, nor how he had found me. But some one had been cutting at my bonds, and now I was free. At least my knife hand was free. Instinctively I looked to my belt to see if my weapons had been taken from me. They lay, the knife and the pistol, by the lantern in the bottom of the boat.

"One minute!" said the man.

I remembered I still had my stiletto hidden at my breast. Perhaps I could draw it before they knew what I was at, and take them by surprise. That would be easier than stooping for my knife and risking a blow at my bent neck. I tightened my muscles for a quick grab at the weapon, and looked across at my two enemies. For some reason I knew I would strike the smaller man first. He was the one who had had the actual killing of my father. I saw the spot on his neck where I would stab. I could almost see the throb of the artery where I meant to strike.

"Half a minute!" said the man.

Then I felt something hard pushed into my hand. It was the haft of a knife. I knew then it was Dirk who had come to my rescue.

"Time!"

I hurled myself forward at my father's murderer, and plunged my blade deep into his throat. He sank limply with a choking gasp, and I fell on top of him snarling through my gag in an uncontrollable access of hate and fury. At the same moment there was a splash and a cry, and a huge figure leapt

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out of the water and dealt with the other man. I saw him as he knelt above his victim draw a knife from his breast dripping dreadfully in the light of the lantern.

In a moment I was free of my bonds. I would have stripped the masks from the dead men, and looked on the faces of these enemies of mine who had already tracked my father to his death, and had so nearly sent me to follow him. But Dirk grasped me and pulled me away. "Back," he said in a low harsh voice, "we must swim for it." And he was in the water.

I stopped to slip my weapons back into my belt, and stuff the manuscript in my breast; and was over the side and in the sea, striking out in the wake of Dirk for the lights of the brig *Revenge*.

CHAPTER XXVII

A NIGHT AND A DAY

AS soon as we clambered on board, dripping from our swim, Dirk dismissed me below without a word except a rough good night. I didn't know how he had come to play the part he had done in the dark adventure of the evening, nor did I give the matter much thought, for my mind was too busy with other aspects of the problem. The feeling that for so long I had been blindly groping on a forlorn quest, and that now by my enemies' own move I had suddenly accomplished not only the mission on which Jenny had sent me, but my own private revenge as well, was like the falling away of an enormous chain, or the flooding of a prison with noonday light.

As I lay on my bunk tossing in my excitement I hugged my arms across my breast and laughed into my blankets. It all seemed so miraculous, so incredible, as though Providence had planned the move and I had merely trodden an ordained path, I wondered whether I were indeed especially cared for and watched over by Heaven. Perhaps my affairs were in the keeping of a power beyond myself. But the thought was swallowed up in my exultation. For I was in a glow of excitement and couldn't sleep. I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to lie awake and let my imagination wing me away to Jenny and the meeting that was to be; for now I could say to her, "He is dead; your father need fear no more."

Again and again I pictured the scene to myself in a tumult

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of rapture. I wouldn't merely be going to her because she had sent for me. The joy I had felt when I learnt she wanted me was intensified a hundredfold by the knowledge that now I had fulfilled the task she had set me to do.

The consideration that I had avenged my father's murder didn't give me so much satisfaction as the knowledge that I had struck down the Captain's foe. I think revenge had become merely a shadowy sort of duty to me, whereas there was a real purpose served in freeing a living man from a lifelong persecution. It needed the bodily presence of my enemy to whip up my fury to the pitch of mortal hatred. While he sat there before me in the boat my fingers had itched for the blow. But now that the blow had been

given I felt no hatred. Indeed I gave little thought to the fellow at all. My mind was turned homewards to Jenny and the welcome that awaited me; and the things that lay at my heart to say made me flush and throb as with a fever.

Between these glowing pictures I tried at times to slip in a question as to how the affair had come about, but it was too much of a puzzle for my mind to solve in its state of fervid imagining. All I could clearly know was that I had been tracked by those two men, and that somehow Dirk discovering my plight had swum silently up to the boat as it lay on the dark waters and so had saved me. For the rest, how they had tracked me, what they thought I knew, I put away for later consideration. And once again turning my mind to Jenny and all the wonder that lay ahead, I at last fell into a troubled sleep, broken by confused visions of mingled rapture and alarm.

For with the wearing of the night a reaction began to set in. Little by little my dreams turned from pleasing glimpses of Jenny to those dark, silent bodies lying motionless under the stars. Once I awoke, thinking that again I was dealing that

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deadly blow; and the feel of the knife as it sank with a thud into the fellow's neck was so real that I thought I had stabbed some one in my sleep. After that the delusion came again and again with sickening reiteration, till at length it seemed to be a punishment I was doomed to undergo rather than the fulfilment of a long-cherished quest. Repeatedly I kept finding myself being dragged unwillingly to the ordeal. Before me was the victim, and always he seemed to be mocking me from under his mask, as though I were the more to be pitied of the two. The fantasy grew upon me that somehow I was striking at my own heart, till it seemed at times it was my father I was bidden to kill, and then it was Dirk, and then it was Jenny herself; at which I would struggle desperately against the fatality that was forcing me on, and would wake with a terrible dread upon me. I would try to soothe myself with the pleasanter thoughts of the days ahead; but the charm had snapped; I couldn't conjure the desirable vision back into my mind; and again I would tumble off into a feverish doze to act over and over the horrible deed of the night. Every detail returned upon me vividly, and even feelings I hadn't been conscious of at the moment surged back upon me. For always there came a stealthy fingering at my hand, and then a

dagger would be slipped furtively into my fingers as though the deed I was to do were evil and accursed. And always I saw the throbbing of the blood at the victim's throat, horribly intensified. And some one would be counting; and at the cry of "Time!" I would leap forward, hating the duty to which some fearful force impelled me, and strike savagely at the spot where the blood beat. Then with the flesh sucking disgustingly at the blade as I tugged to draw it free, and with a gush of blood that blinded me as I toppled forward on to my

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victim, I would start awake with a sense of loathsome horror as though I had been physically sick.

It was a relief to see at last the first light of the morning whitening at the chinks of the door. It wasn't long before I was into my clothes and out on deck, sluicing off the fumes of the ugly dreams which seemed to cling about me like a perspiration.

Then I looked out across the water, and identified the little boat still swaying on the foamless waves. In it I knew were those dead men, with sightless eyes wide open under their masks, gazing up at the still grey sky. It seemed of a sudden a terrible thing that they had been left to lie alone there all through the night, growing stiff and cold, and with the blood drying and thickening about their clothes and skin. As I gazed across the water it was as if I could see them; on their faces was a look of reproach as though I had done a cruel thing.

I couldn't bear the thought of it. I turned away to find Dirk, surprised that he hadn't slipped quietly out to sea during the night. But I was more surprised to learn he had already gone ashore, and wasn't expected to return till evening. He had left instruction, however, that I wasn't to leave the ship.

So there I was, imprisoned for a wearying day, with the vision ever before me of what I had done. I longed to be away from it all. Not that I was afraid that the murder would be traced to me. Somehow such an eventuality didn't occur to me; I was so weighed down with the sickening sense of blood-guiltiness which seemed to cling about me like a dripping garment, a garment soaked in blood, that I had no thought to give to any other fear than the one at my own conscience. I began to understand why a murderer should go mad.

As in the night I tried to cheer myself with the consolation that I would soon be with Jenny again. I told myself I had

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struck the blow for her. I hadn't been guilty of murder; rather I had been the instrument in the hands of justice and retribution. But always at my heart was that paralysing shadow which numbed me from confident thinking. I knew I had done a horrible thing, and there would be a cloud over my life to the end of my days. The sunshine would never be so bright for me again. In the beautiful breaking of the dawn there would always be something of the redness of blood. The glory of the sea would be less buoyant and splendid, for there would be a subduing sense of tragedy in the swelling and subsiding of the waves. And Jenny too! ... When I thought of her now a spring and a freshness seemed to have gone out of my heart. Bitterly I said that the Shadow of Fear was over me more deeply and darkly now that the evil thing was killed.

Yet all this, I tried to persuade myself, was a silly fantasy, due to the chafing inaction of an idle day after the excitement of such a night. Once out upon the open seas I should be myself again.

Then I noticed a boat put out from shore, and make for that other boat where the dead men lay. Eagerly I watched it, wondering what it meant. On the shore a crowd had gathered, and was fast increasing. Some one had given notice of the killing. Again I looked at the boat as it rowed out from the land. In it were three men; officers, to judge by their uniform. They soon reached their destination, and for a long while seemed to be examining the corpses. But at length they hauled in the anchor and towed the deadly freight back to the shore, where I soon lost the party in the crowd.

I was all the more anxious now for Dirk's return. It seemed foolish delaying here; some incriminating evidence might lead

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to our being suspected. It wasn't till this moment that I realized that there was any danger threatening us from the law.

So with added anxiety to wear down my spirit I waited through that harrowing day. At length with the evening Dirk returned, and gave orders for sailing with the dawn.

He called for me before I went below, and closing the door of the cabin said, "Wull, Tommy, I've paid my debt at last."

I thought for a moment, and answered, "Yes, you said you would save my life some day."

"An' it seems I've done it, kiddy," he replied, and shook my hand.

I was too full of doubts and questionings to be moved by the sentimental aspect of the affair. I merely said, "Thank you, * Dirk," and went on, "But why don't you sail quick?"

"Mustn't seem to be running away," he answered, biting at his quid and commencing to chew. "They might get thinking things."

"What do they think?" I asked.

"Mighty little," he answered. "Don't seem to have no sort of a scent. At any rate, kiddy, we're free of it. We can clear out all straight and easy tomorrow. But it's lost me a day again."

"Has he gone?" I asked.

He stopped in his chewing and spat viciously.

"Slipped clean through my fingers, blast him!" he replied.

He clenched his fist in the way I knew, and his face grew dark and ugly. "But I'll haul him in short," he added. "The v'yage an't over yet."

After a pause I said, "How was it you found me?"

"Dunno quite," he told me. "Some one pushed up against me an' said 'There's Tommy in that boat there. They'll kill him.' I couldn't see the cove what said it; he'd slipped clear

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away. An' for a bit I thought it were a gag to have me. But I reckons it out that if you were there I must see you clear again. So I dips in an' swims quietly up, an' that's all about it."

I knew it must have been Picardino who had sent Dirk to the rescue. I had told him of Dirk, and doubtless he could have easily identified him. But that meant he must have been following me after I left him. Had he any premonition that I might be attacked? Or was it just kindly shepherding, or even mere luck? I mentioned nothing of this to Dirk, for I wished first to unravel the mystery for myself.

I said good night, and trotted off to my bunk. I slept soundly enough that night, and with the morning was eagerly at work unfurling the sails and trimming the ship for sea.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

A REVELATION

IT was still early in the summer when I stood at last before the Captain's house in London, with the knocker raised in my hand, but half fearing to strike from bashfulness; for a new access of shyness flooded my heart at the prospect of seeing Jenny. Something of the hesitation that had delayed me at Sunset Towers when I had stood fingering the handle of her door possessed me now. Twice I laid the knocker silently back, and paced up and down before the dark straight slice of a house, as it seemed to me, looking eagerly up at the windows, hoping Jenny might see me and let me in. But she didn't see me; or if she did she made no sign. So perforce I took the knocker in hand once more, and followed a feeble tap with a couple of sounding blows which echoed thunderingly down the street. Then I stood waiting with ill-suppressed excitement for the door to open.

Presently there were light steps within, and the door opened. A servant girl stood before me eyeing me dubiously. I was taken aback, for ignorant of city manners, and not considering that Jenny knew nothing of my presence there, I had expected to see my little playmate herself. So I blurted out, "Jenny!" and quickly tried to cover my mistake by saying, "I want to see Jenny."

"You wish to see Miss Jenny Field?" the maid enquired with smug politeness, to my complete confusion.

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"Yes," I said. "Tell her."

But she stood facing me doubtfully, and asked, "And what name, please?"

Then indeed I drew myself up, conscious of the dignity of my lawful appellation, and emboldened by the smart new suit I had first taken the precaution to obtain, and pronounced grandly, "Thomas Garth Playden, of the brig *Revenge*."

At that I was admitted, and bidden to wait in the hall. The maid disappeared. Then suddenly there was a glad cry; a door flew open, and the maid was unceremoniously thrust aside. Before me stood a slim little figure that I knew at once, though now there was a band of deep red ribbon

restraining the disorderly locks, and the dark eyes had lost their fierceness but glowed with an intensity of ardour that seemed to burn into me like the light from the deep heart of a sunset.

“Tommy!” she cried, with hands outstretched to me.

If it hadn’t been for that wretched maid huddled so amazedly against the wall, with wide eyes open and mouth agape at this unladylike behaviour, I should have flung my arms about my little sweetheart, and so boldly leapt that line which is so difficult to cross. But I merely took the outstretched hands in mine, still furtively eyeing the maid, and said feebly enough, “I’ve come.”

The glow faded from Jenny’s eyes. Looking demurely away from me she said, “Yes.”

Then the girl did recover her wits and took herself off. But the chance had slipped away, and when I would have put my arms about Jenny’s shoulders she gently released herself, and politely invited me to come and see papa.

As I entered the drawing-room I managed to whisper, “Jenny, I’ve killed him.”

She started, and would have held me back, but the Captain

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had seen me, and called out a hearty, “Tommy, boy, come along in.”

I only felt a keen squeeze at my hand. Jenny had understood.

So the vision of my home-coming wasn’t realized in all the wonderful colours in which I had painted it in my imagination. But still, there was Jenny before me; and while the Captain chatted, questioning me of my experiences, comparing notes of foreign towns and ways, and storms and adventures at sea, I watched the slim little girl who had grown wonderfully tall and slender in the passage of a single year. Indeed I didn’t quite know whether it was the same Jenny I had played and quarreled with only a twelvemonth ago. It wasn’t so much that she had grown; rather she seemed to have settled to a subdued seriousness not quite in keeping with the Jenny of my games and squabbles. I couldn’t hear her saying now, “I hate you,” as she had used to do. And yet a gesture here and there, and the tone of her voice when she threw in a quick word, touched at memories of the past, linking up this grave-eyed girl with the child of the year before.

As the evening wore away I had quite accepted the change in her, and the thought did just come to me that she too must have been surveying me

with something of the same enquiry. I wondered whether she was as satisfied with the new Tommy as I was with the new Jenny. For though at first the change in her had taken me aback, I soon realized I was more head over heels in love with the charming girl who sat there at her father's feet, solemnly resting her eyes on mine, and now and again broadening her lips in a wonderful smile, than ever I had been with the bright vivid tempestuous little creature I had known at Sunset Towers. For now there seemed to be a depth and reserve behind those eyes, whereas before their glitter had

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told of a wonderful keen life, it is true, but one that played merely on the surface of things.

I had little leisure to notice the Captain. He was extraordinarily kind, even boisterous, in his welcome. He asked but little of my truancy from Sunset Towers, and spoke chiefly of my doings at sea. He showed nothing of the dark fear that had used to overshadow his face even in his most genial moments. I wondered whether somehow he had heard of his enemy's death, though not knowing who had rid him of his tormentor. But I said nothing of the matter. With the memory of that dark evening when I had parted with him last I was cautious how I spoke of dangerous things. And in any case it would keep. Moreover, the thought of it only came to me in fitful starts, for my heart was with the daughter, not the father.

When I rose to go he seemed surprised. "What? How?" he exclaimed, rising. "But you're not running away again, are you?"

"I must go back to Dirk," I said.

"Dirk, eh?" he repeated.

"I'm under orders," I explained. "I must report every night."

"Tush!" he cried impatiently, "That's over now. You come and live with me, laddie." Then he looked sharply at me and in a low voice, "You don't bear me ill-will, Tommy, do you?"

I knew of what he was thinking, and the pain in his voice hurt me like a physical wound. I gripped his hand and explained as well as I could that I was under some kind of bond, owing to my father's will, to apprentice myself to a profession, and I had taken Dirk as my master and must obey him.

"Right, quite right," said the Captain, evidently recognizing the necessity of the position, but still feeling for some way

to evade it. After a moment he said, "Well, I reckon you've served your apprenticeship; and, as for money, you needn't worry your mind about that. You leave Dirk and come to me. I dare say I can teach you a thing or two."

"Can you take me to sea?" I asked.

At that he smiled rather sadly, and answered, "Well, no. I should think my sailing days are done."

He sat down, and with his head in his hands seemed to be musing regretfully.

I told him where I was lodging, and promised to come as often and stay as late as I could. He glanced across at Jenny, and said, "Yes, I'd lay you'll do that right enough, laddie." We shook hands cordially, and his last words were, "You see, you're always running away from me, Tommy. I never know where to lay hands on you. You frighten me, my boy. I like to have you near me."

He seemed strangely moved. I remembered Worthing telling me how disturbed he had been when he had heard of my escape from Rancey Bridge.

As I said good night to Jenny she stopped me at the door to say, "And you've really killed him, Tommy?"

"Yes," I said.

"Sure?" she asked, fixing me steadily with her eyes.

"Sure," I replied confidently.

"Oh, Tommy!" she sighed, lifting her face to mine. I kissed her. Then she slipped away from me, and smiling roguishly cried: "There, good night. Little boys should be in bed."

So I walked away to my lodging in a dream.

I learnt later why she had enquired so seriously as to whether I was sure I had accomplished my task. It seemed that once

before she had thought I had fulfilled the mission. Her father had grown wonderfully cheerful, and she had imagined that at last the terror must have been lifted from his life. His moving to London had seemed to her a sign that the evil days were over, and that he could come out of hiding. It was

just before the removal that Picardino had appeared, and she had given him the message that had reached me at Naples.

I asked her whether she had been angry with me for not obeying her summons. She replied that she had been so angry that if at last I had come to her she wouldn't have spoken to me for it had seemed to her that there was nothing to keep me from her as the task had been fulfilled; and even without a summons I should have returned to her. But then she had learnt the reason of my delay. For somehow her father had been deceived into a false assurance of safety. The enemy had risen up against him once more.

Poor little Jenny had had a terrible time, for Abou had begged to be sent back to his own people as his master didn't seem to need him now; so when the evil had arisen afresh Jenny had been left alone to tend a half-mad father. He had refused to go back to Sunset Towers without Abou to take care of him. He had remained in London, determined to face out the persecution and take what might befall. Jenny had comforted herself by saying that I must be on the man's track, and some day would assuredly run him to earth. At that I felt very guilty, for all this while I had been gaily sailing the seas with Dirk without a notion in my head as to how my mission was to be accomplished.

However, a few days before my arrival a complete change had come over the Captain, and Jenny had told herself, that at last I had been successful. And then she told me she knew I

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would soon be home again; and somehow her confidence in me was inexpressibly delicious.

So I spent the days with Jenny; but all that we said to each other, however precious in my own memory, would be of little interest to others; and at any rate it doesn't concern the story I have set myself to tell. It is enough to say that we were wonderfully happy together, though the words I wanted to speak always seemed to catch at my throat, yet when alone I could be eloquent enough on the theme of my passion. Also the Captain fathered me with an overflowing affection which left no doubt in my mind that when Jenny and I stepped out of girl- and boyhood nothing would please him better than the fulfilment of the dream with which I flattered my own heart.

I'm afraid I forgot Worthing for a time. It wasn't until the third or fourth day that I stepped out for the city to look him up. Even so it was a duty call, for I grudged every minute away from Jenny. I think I was relieved when I learnt he was away.

Jenny told me he had called on her father a long time ago. It was while she was waiting for me to come back to her, and she had told Worthing what she thought of my desertion. He had smiled darkly at her when she declared she would never speak to me again; and indeed he had so angered her that she had stamped her foot at him and told him she believed it was he himself who was keeping me away from her.

"I was like that," she said simply enough, as she told me the story. "I was a silly girl, wasn't I, Tommy?" Words thronged to my lips in such a gush of protestation that I stuttered stupidly and couldn't utter a coherent syllable. She went on with a laugh, "And he said to me in such a strange

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way, 'I *am* keeping him from you,' and walked away and left me.

I thought nothing of it, partly because I was too intent upon Jenny herself, and partly because I knew the reserved, bitter way in which Worthing chose to disguise his real thoughts.

That was all I learnt of Worthing, for Jenny hadn't seen him since.

A few days later I made my way to the city a second time. I remember Dirk had changed our lodging that same morning, owing to a rather nasty brawl. There was a strange excitement among the clerks in the office when I went in and enquired if Worthing had returned yet. The senior clerk took me gravely aside, and speaking confidentially said: "You were his friend, I think?"

"Yes," I replied, in unaccountable alarm at something sinister in the tone of his voice.

"Yes," he repeated, stroking his chin. Then suddenly looking me in the eyes, and laying a hand very gently on my shoulder, he said sadly, "He's dead," and as I started back, "Dead," he repeated, "and the master too. They were found murdered in a boat at Naples."

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CHAPTER XXIX

ALONE

TO say that the news stunned me would merely be to use an empty conventional phrase. Not even the shock of my father's death had so dislocated my whole power of thought and association. My father, I had always known, lived continually under the shadow of danger. For a hand to reach for him out of the dark was a chance I had long reckoned into the scheme of things. The sudden blow had struck merely at my heart of love. It had been desolating, but not bewildering. And that was last year. But now I waded in a mist of baffling and unreasonable extravagances. I was like a thing blindfolded, and set to find my way through a tangled maze, with voices crying to me conflicting directions, walls suddenly confronting me where there had seemed to be an open space, hands pushing me away when I thought I had stumbled on to a path at last. There seemed no motive, no coherence, no unity, in the chaos about me. Nothing tangible offered itself to my distracted clutching. All was fluid, impalpable, as though the world had shifted its centre, throwing everything into a false relation and perspective.

Where I fed and slept during the days that followed I don't remember. I suppose I must have wandered mechanically to my lodging every night, and found my way to some tavern when my appetite prompted me to do so, without any governance or bidding of my brain. All that is clear to me is that I haunted the office, gleaning detail upon detail of the tragedy, hoping with a waning but desperate hope that somewhere there

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was an error, that all would come right at last. But from the first word I knew full well that all would not come right. Worthing was dead. He had been murdered. It was I myself who had murdered him. Still I refused to listen to the steady voice within me which day by day repeated so dully and so obstinately, "You have killed him, you have killed him." I fought against it, and sometimes shouted wildly to drown its insistent burden, or rushed away into the streets with my hands at my ears, till I wonder I wasn't arrested and locked up as a madman. But the truth had to be faced at last. With every fresh detail, as the news came slowly through, I felt the fearful

reality of the thing closing about me like the grip of some slow, cruel animal gloating at my pain.

At last I ceased to haunt the office. I knew all I was likely to know, and I would have given my life to have known nothing. Some papers were stuffed into my hands, I remember; for Worthing had been managing my affairs, and now I must find another to steer me through the legal maze. But just then my helplessness didn't trouble me. It was the dreadful knowledge that I had killed my friend which stung me like a stabbing dagger, goading me out of the heavy lethargy that might mercifully have numbed my feelings, and teasing me to a constant realization of the maddening truth.

I didn't dare visit Jenny. Indeed I felt a horror at the thought of ever seeing her again. It was for her I had murdered Worthing. I didn't blame her; but somehow there seemed to me an unholy fate binding us together, and unless I could tear myself free even darker consequences would ensue. There was a bond of blood between us. To think of her even was to awaken a bitter cry in my heart, an echo as it were from another world of a reproach I couldn't bear. For Jenny was like a living monument of the evil I had done. With her

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image in my mind I was for ever whipped back to that night at Naples, forced to deal again that dreadful blow through knowing now whose life it was I was stabbing out of the world.

I think Dirk must have been away for some days, for I don't remember his questioning me on the strange shadow that had so suddenly darkened my life. If he had been at my lodging he couldn't but have seen that something desperately wrong had taken place. It wasn't till I had regained something of my self-control that I remember seeing him again. Then he eyed me wonderingly as though enquiring the cause of my strangeness. I think he must have told himself some early love affair had upset me, for he smiled knowingly, and talked about girls being the devil, declaring they weren't worth a broken heart, nor yet a sleepless night even. I let him think what he would, and kept my own counsel. I didn't dare tell him the truth, for he would say the blame was his, as indeed to some extent it was; for if he hadn't rescued me, as he imagined, I should soon have been freed of the gag about my face, and then Worthing would have recognized me, and all would have been well.

So I kept away from Dirk as much as I could. It was easy enough, for he seemed to be hot on the trail again. I wandered off by myself, though where I used to get to I don't know. Then I began to try to piece the mystery together, but little enough could I fit consistently. I knew now that my first surmise had been correct: I had been mistaken for my father's murderer, for it was obvious that Worthing wouldn't knowingly have treated me as he had done. There would have been no sense in it. I couldn't help complaining bitterly at the amazing ill luck, as it seemed, which had taken me to Naples just when Worthing happened to have traced his quarry there. Of course he couldn't have dreamt of my presence; and I had

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grown, and my face was tanned brown; his uncle had never seen me before, and in the boat when Worthing had first looked upon me my face was half covered with the gag. All this seemed like a deliberate trick of some malignant devil of fate, and I felt the weight of the old curse bear heavily upon me like a burden.

Beyond this I could establish little to my satisfaction. How Worthing had obtained the manuscript I couldn't think. I supposed he had stolen it from the murderer, and was using it to show he knew what he was about. But what puzzled me was that he had seemed to suggest that there was some piece of information he wanted for which he was willing to allow my father's murderer to escape. He had wanted, in fact, to learn the mystery of the treasure cave. Why? I asked myself. I couldn't believe he had been led away from his quest by the lure of gold. There must be something deeper underlying it all, something which lay concealed in the earth which to Worthing was of greater importance even than the dragging to justice of a murderer. It must be something of rare importance, I argued, if it were worth such a prize, for I knew his enthusiasm for justice—which to him was like a physical passion.

And there my reason stayed. But I knew enough to realize I hadn't yet fulfilled the quest Jenny had set me on. At first it had seemed like an exquisite piece of irony that I had been searching for her father's enemy only to learn that all the while I had been tracking down my own friend. But now I knew I had killed my friend for nothing. My father's murderer and the Captain's persecutor were still at large. I thought by Worthing's story they were probably the same man, but I had paid a terrible price for

that little piece of information. So with the wretched thought at my heart that I had killed my

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friend, severed myself from my sweetheart, and had all my work still before me, I felt utterly weary and deserted, an outcast of fortune, alone in an evil world.

Little by little, of course I came to face up to the thing. I was no longer the boy I had been even a year ago when my father had been killed. I had seen the world since then; I had developed in mind and body. I think my love for Jenny had helped to give me something of a man's outlook and self-reliance, though I was still far enough from the years of manhood. I knew I must take my life into my hands, not mope stupidly and aimlessly, hoping for something to come to my aid from Heaven knew where. With the growth of this resolution to see the thing through I began to turn over the papers I had been given, and to dip here and there into my father's writings, thinking I might come upon some clue which would lead me to the heart of the mystery. For I knew now there would be no peace for me till the evil ghost was laid.

So I turned over the pages, but my mind was still too distracted for clear thinking, and I learnt little. Then I began to long for Jenny again, though I knew I mustn't see her. For I had told her that her father's enemy was dead, that I had killed him, and now I knew he was still alive, and possibly was already casting his evil snares once again about the Captain's life. I couldn't face Jenny till I had really freed her father from his foe. I remembered my father's words, "Always make sure, Tommy." If he had made sure that night in the hut, if I hadn't fired into the mirror at Sunset Towers, if I had but torn aside the mask before I had dealt the fatal blow at Naples! ... But such considerations were clean from the purpose and only left me limp and dejected, speculating on what might so easily have been, and crying against the strangling fatality which seemed to have my whole life in its evil

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grip. All I knew for certain was that my father's murderer, the Captain's enemy, was still alive, and I mustn't see Jenny again until I had killed him beyond all shadow of doubt.

Yet I couldn't keep quite away. I began to wander at night in front of the tall dark house, and then took to going round to the garden at the back, where I soon found I could climb the wall and watch the light in a window up above which somehow I knew must be Jenny's. I used to hide in a great rhododendron bush and fix my eyes on that light, telling myself that tomorrow I would pack up my dunnage and make tracks for the *Dolphin*, and search the coast as I had never searched it before till I had unravelled the whole tangled mystery. I thought I might even lie in wait for my enemy there, for Worthing had said the fellow would be sure to turn up sooner or later as evidently he was in search of the treasure. But though I kept telling myself I would go the next day, I was always back at my post watching the light in Jenny's window. And the summer was half spent.

But one night I was rewarded for my vigil. For Jenny pulled aside her blind, and I heard her brokenly sighing my name. It wasn't till then that I realized that she must be in a torment of distress at my sudden desertion of her. I had been so engrossed with my own troubles that I hadn't thought of hers. I would have broken cover and called up to her, but at that moment I heard a door open, and a dark figure slipped noiselessly out of the house. A voice was saying in the suave kind tones I knew so well, "Courage, my master. Did I not hear you call me, and I at the end of the world? Yes, and I will come to you again, be assured."

The Captain replied brokenly out of the shadows, "Oh, Abou, Abou!"

So Abou was back again. His wonderful instinct had told

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him his master was in trouble and needed him. I wondered if he had been back long. Perhaps it was his coming that had set the Captain's mind at rest, whereas I had thought it was the news of the Naples murder which I had assumed he must have heard in some way. The thought was but a flash in my mind, for the Captain went on, "You will find him, Abou, and bring him back. Tell him, tell him I will be his father. Tell him ... But what can I say? Boys don't care for that sort of thing. But I love the bairn, Abou, and I want him back."

"You shall have him, my master," said Abou, and glided away, while I crouched motionless not daring to breathe.

Then the Captain came out into the garden and strolled up and down a turn or two muttering my name. I knew I had but to come from my hiding

to be welcomed back into that house with open arms. Yet I knew I mustn't go. It would be under false pretences. First I must accomplish my task.

I waited till the Captain had retired, shooting the bolts behind the closed door before I crept from cover and cautiously made my escape. My heart was bitterly sore at the thought of all the love I was leaving: the Captain wanting me back as though I were his son, yet unable to frame a message for me, thinking I might make fun of his affection, and doubtless wondering why I had changed my lodging without sending him word; and my little Jenny perhaps crying herself to sleep with my name on her lips, her pride broken by longing and anxiety and doubt. My own eyes were none too dry, nor was my breathing very certain, as I slipped back to my lodging and hastily packed my knapsack. Then heedless of Dirk's injunctions I stepped out into the night before my resolution should waver, and set forth once more for the *Dolphin* and the mystery that lay like a shadow of blood over the wonderful coast about Ebb-Tide Pool.

CHAPTER XXX

DRIFT-WOOD CAVERN

THE sight of the familiar scene where I had spent so many happy summers, and where I had received one desolating blow, seemed to clear and steady my mind. Sometimes I would remember only the passionate hours of climbing and swimming I had known there, and would revert to the delighted boy I had been not so very long ago. But always the shadow would fall about me again; yet, although it toned down my joy at being back in the country of my heart, it didn't cloud me from a steady pursuing of the purpose I had set myself to accomplish.

First of all I re-explored every nook and cranny I had ever visited; and that alone was the work of some days. I reserved Drift-Wood Cavern for the last, intending to devote all my energies to tracing it to its source when once I had satisfied myself that there was nothing else to learn from the coast to either side of it. In the evenings I sat up by the open window, or, when darkness had fallen, by the light of my lamp, studying the papers my father had left behind him. The priest's manuscript was of little use to me. Its drenching in the sea hadn't increased its clarity, and as I understood little Latin the text was of no help. I turned to the map, and tried to wrest the secret from it; but you can't get the secret from a thing which isn't there. The fragment that held the clue simply didn't exist, and it was impossible to reconstruct it except with baseless imaginings.

My father's papers didn't help me much. They were mostly fragments of stories and poems. It was a sad thing to sit by

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my lamp night after night as my father had done before me, and read over those scraps of broken literature, feeling in every line the marvellous promise and powers that had been frittered so idly away. Young as I was, I was judge enough to recognize the work of a master story-teller, and even the authentic ring of poetry, in the unfinished sketches before me. Though I tried to remain loyal to my father's memory I couldn't prevent the cry from rising to my heart, "Oh dad, dad, why did you waste your days hunting for that accursed treasure when you might have been among the greatest writers of the land?"

Of the stories I sorted out those which seemed to be based in any way on the one great story of the hidden gold. Yet even so I couldn't learn much, for my father modified his facts for dramatic effect, heightening the colours here and omitting the lesser links of the narrative elsewhere, so that I couldn't piece together anything consecutive. Indeed my father's purpose, so I judged, hadn't been to write a connected history. Elements of the affair appealed to him first in this light and then in that, and he had transmuted them into imaginative sketches, suggesting an underlying basis in fact, but misleading in detail.

There was one story which appealed to me particularly, and it was the only one which could be called complete. It appealed to me because it reminded me of the night at Sunset Towers when my father had told the story of the cursing of the treasure and the terrible fulfilment of the curse. Here was a tale evidently based on the priest's confession. The setting was much the same as that of the story I knew, yet there were details which showed that my father had in mind not only the valley of the tombs but the coast-line round the *Dolphin*, and so the incidents were brought more vividly home to me than they would otherwise have been. First there was an account of the discovery of the treasure by a party of adventurers; but when

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half of it had been safely brought to the light a quarrel broke out, and the Captain of the band found himself standing almost alone against a mutinous crew. But he was a wily man, and succeeded in tricking his enemies; and having trapped them in the cave where the treasure lay he rolled a huge boulder to the cave's mouth and imprisoned them alive. So far the story was only a variant of the one I had heard so thrillingly told on that memorable night; and the account of the frenzy which overwhelmed the Captain with terror and remorse was much the same as in the account I knew so well of the Mad Captain and which now, with my own hands stained with blood, I could appreciate to the full. But after this the story changed. For a stranger had somehow stolen the plans and learnt of the hidden gold, though he didn't know the secret of the entrance to the cave. When the Captain learnt there was some one on the track of the treasure a terrible fear seized him lest his crime should be discovered. Whipped on by a fearful fury of madness, he ruthlessly hunted down the meddlesome interloper, and eventually capturing the wretch chained him living in a

dungeon and sealed the door up against him, having hung the stolen plans about his neck for a warning to any who might find him and be so bold as to follow in his steps.

The tale gripped me chiefly because of the intensity of the atmosphere of terror and madness which prevailed it, till the reading of it seemed like the very tones of my father's voice as he had used to speak in the old times when the night hung black outside the pane, and only the firelight leapt and sank in the shadowy chamber where we sat together, he leaning back in his chair, and I huddled at his knees. I knew I was reading a piece of great literature; and again that regretful reproach sounded in my heart against my father: Why had he neglected such talents to squander his life away in a stupid hunt for gold?

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But another reason which made the story of interest to me was the picture of the wretched victim chained into the dungeon with the plans about his neck, for I thought I had come upon a further link in the strange series of crimes which had made one tale of horror of the searching for that evil gold. Here was the explanation of the skeleton I had found at Sunset Towers. Worthing's uncle had said that the story of its coming there was interesting enough in its own way. Doubtless he was referring to this yarn of my father's. But when I began to put things together I found that after all I had learnt little. The yarn was probably no more than a yarn, springing from my father's fertile imagination. And even if it were true it only told me of something so distant as to be of no value. Yet the story clung to my memory. I kept turning to it as though somehow it contained the clue to the mystery I was seeking to unravel.

Reading my father's papers sent me frequently to his grave, which now was nothing but a grass-grown mound in the woods, nameless and dateless. I set to work to carve a rough cross with his name upon it. I had thought to have added something to tell of my love for him, and the blank which his death had made in my life. But words were so stupidly inadequate that I merely carved his name and locked my wounded and inarticulate love in my own heart.

Besides my father's papers there were the papers which Worthing's clerk had given me. I studied these carefully, but they contained nothing but a clear and precise account of the investments he had made with my money. So clear indeed was the statement that even I could understand it, and I

knew I should have no difficulty in conducting my own affairs when occasion called. I felt a gush of gratitude to my dead friend who had taken such care of my concerns. I thought of how he had sacrificed pride and principle to rescue me from Rancey

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Bridge, and how he had sustained and guided me in the days that had followed that dreadful first of May. And in return I had killed him!

Well, I knew it was useless brooding over things which couldn't be amended, yet my heart was heavy with the weight of sorrows it had to bear.

Meanwhile by day I was searching the countryside for traces of the mysterious passage which should reveal to me the secret of the treasure. Again I enquired of the obstinate Dragon's Mouth; but the great tongue remained foolishly thrust out at me, and the wide jagged lips were dumb. I sounded up and down through the Smugglers' Tunnel, and knocked at the fallen doors of Ebb-Tide Gate; but nothing opened to my knocking. So at last I set myself to explore Drift-Wood Cavern.

I think I delayed the exploration as long as possible because I still remembered the strange fear which had possessed me when I first entered those green and evil waters. There was a dread holding me away from the place. But I knew I must face the ordeal, so at length I took my courage in my hands and dived into the darkness. I was gratified to find that the old fear didn't return, only a sense of faint disgust at the furtive clinging weeds and the slow smooth drifts of refuse which had gathered there through the years.

I provided myself with clothes and lantern, and such tools as I thought might be necessary, also a tin of ship's biscuits, thrusting them into the crevice from the Smugglers' Tunnel so that I merely had to reach for them when in the cavern. And so I was sheltered from the cold of wetness and nakedness, and had a light to search by and tools to probe with. I was determined that if the place really held a secret I would wrest it away before I had done.

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My first entrance was at high tide, and I soon found I could do little. The tunnel penetrated far into the land, but sank downwards, so I found myself held back by the deepening water. Accordingly the next time I went at low tide, and made an interesting discovery: the roof of the tunnel sank and rose

and sank again, forming pockets, as it were. All the way beyond the first pocket the roof was slippery with weed, telling me that at high tide the tunnel was full of water. It was an unpleasant discovery, for I knew that if I weren't careful I might be caught in one of the pockets and trapped by the rising tide. At the first feel of the stealing water about my ankles I beat a hurried retreat, in alarm at being snared and drowned like a rat in a trap. But I found my fear was premature. I could have continued my search for a long time yet without danger.

At my third attempt I started with the tide at half ebb, so as to give myself the maximum time for exploring. I waded knee-deep up the long and winding tunnel, thrusting my lantern into every nook and cranny, and digging with my hands into the thick weeds which dripped from the walls. And so I passed pocket after pocket, and knew that the tide must soon be on the turn. I was afraid to stay much longer, but ducked under one last arch. The tunnel rose up steeply before me. I gazed above; and the swinging light of my lantern fell full upon the white bones of a skeleton.

For a moment I stood motionless, gazing, while the crabs scuttled out of the light. My thought was, "Poor wretch, he must have been caught in the tide." At that moment there came a little slap of water at my feet. It was like some evil serpent of the sea thrusting out a cold, lean throat towards me, flickering about me with a cruel forked tongue, gathering itself to strike. So unnerving was the swift impression that with

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a cold panic at my heart I turned and fled, splashing down the tunnel to safety; and for a couple of days or more I dared not venture back, though again and again I dived into the cavern intending to pursue my search, and unravel the meaning of that skeleton.

But for a while I couldn't bring my courage to the necessary pitch. The thought of being trapped there like that drowned wretch, of having my flesh eaten off me by those loathsome, hurrying creatures I had startled with my lantern, was too dreadful a prospect. I told myself that in a day or two I should regain my nerve. Meanwhile to erase the impression I set myself to accomplish a feat I had long vowed to attempt: the scaling of that great bulging rock that overbrowed Ebb-Tide Pool.

My various efforts would be of little interest even if I could describe them in detail. It is enough to record that at the third or fourth attempt I found a way up. There on the top was the level space I had often climbed

down to from above, but had never before scaled from below. Beneath me lay the pool of smooth water, so tempting with the sun blazing upon it, that, although I had never dived from such a height, without a thought I flung out my arms and shot downwards through a thrilling rush of air, while the blue pool seemed to leap up at me from below and engulf me with its closing waters.

I rose to the surface panting and glowing and wonderfully excited. For the second time I climbed to the level platform to hurl myself once more into the pool beneath.

I think my success in climbing the great jutting rock heartened me for my real task. The next day I set forth in great spirit. I clambered down to the platform, stripped off my clothes, but as always, belted my knife about me, and plunged

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into the pool and under the arch. I was soon at the surface, puffing and treading water, closed about by the darkness of Drift-Wood Cavern. The tide was almost at full ebb; so not wasting a moment I was out of the water and had lit my lantern; for I kept a store of oil in the cavern with my food and other necessities, so that I could resume work whenever convenient. I had soon roughly dried myself and pulled on some clothes, and stuffing some biscuits in my pocket I set off with all speed down the tunnel, not wasting time by feeling to left and right, but making straight ahead, intent on finding the skeleton. It wasn't very long before I was once more standing at the foot of the slope with the light of my lantern gleaming whitely on the clean-picked bones above.

I had to climb to reach the thing, for the tunnel rose sharply. Reaching it I stooped to examine it. There was an earthenware bottle about its neck, and this immediately caught my eyes. It was tightly corked, I found; so tightly that when I had pulled the bottle away from the rotten string that held it, I had some difficulty in digging out the cork with my knife. But at last I had cut it away. Inside there was a folded slip of paper. Trembling with excitement I thrust my finger in, and eventually succeeded in working out the paper. But it was inconceivably old and yellow; and although the water had been kept away from it, it was sadly the worse for age, not to mention the damage caused by my excited fingering as I had worked it free. So it was only after a careful and close perusal that I began to understand

something of the faded writing. But what I did understand set my blood madly beating at my ears and temples. The man hadn't been trapped, as I had thought, having penetrated over-boldly into the tunnel; he had been working from the other direction, from somewhere deep under the earth, and had never reached the sea.

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Little by little as I studied the paper I began to piece out a story of crime and horror which struck strangely familiar to my mind. Here was one who had been searching for that gold; another victim of the curse, I told myself, darkly wondering how many had been the victims of the outraged gods if the whole tale of them were numbered. He too had been one of a party who had found and handled the gold; but as usual—and the recurrence of the thing seemed absurd in its inevitability—there had been strife and disagreement. As in the old story of the manuscript, and also in the fanciful yarn of my father's, there had been treachery and betrayal. The stone that guarded the cave-mouth had been rolled back upon a party of wretches imprisoning them alive. History had repeated itself, I thought. The original crime of the Mad Captain and his followers had been perpetrated a second time, not only in imagination, as in my father's yarn, but in reality. But there was a difference. As I examined the script, making out here and there another word, and another, I began to find myself on a clue worth all the rest of the story. When once removed the boulder that had guarded the cave-mouth had been so delicately poised that a couple of men could roll it back into place, though it had needed twenty with ropes and levers to heave it up from the hole it covered. But the thing that arrested me was that the boulder had originally been at the end of a short but steep passage rising up from the sea into the land, and the entrance it had sealed was a large hole in the floor of the tunnel. When the great stone was released, instead of merely falling back into place, its impetus as it fell had carried it over the pit it had first covered, and it had rushed to the mouth of the tunnel itself where it had stuck, jammed immovably in the narrow opening. I didn't need to cast about in my mind for a possible locality to suit the description; I knew at once it was the

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Dragon's Mouth. I had been right in my surmise that if that tongue were drawn back into the throat the mystery would be laid bare. No wonder the

priest's map had failed to give my father the clue he had needed. By the rolling of that stone the trace of the pit-mouth had been destroyed.

But I wasn't satisfied yet. Again I bent to the withered paper. However, I learnt little more, for a great deal was illegible, though I determined when out in the daylight to scan it letter by letter till all lay clear. But I did learn the personal tragedy of the wretch whose bones lay before me. When his party had been trapped, and had wasted their energies making futile efforts to escape, futile appeals to their enemies, clamouring at the great sealed door as though their voices could penetrate it, he had set himself to search for some other way of breaking from his prison. He noticed that in the cave there was a wide pool of water which rose and sank with the tide, and so he had argued that it must communicate with the sea. In a desperate resolve he had written out his story, and corking the paper securely in a bottle he had tied it round his neck, so that if he perished his body might be found at sea, and his friends at least be rescued. Then diving into the pool he had trusted to good fortune to see him out to safety. I could reconstruct the sequel without much difficulty. He had groped his way through the water and had found the mouth of a tunnel, where, risking all, he had entered and swum for dear life. But the fates had been against him; he had been trapped in this pocket having risen and plunged again how many times I couldn't say. But I knew he had made his bid for freedom with the tide well in, for at low water having reached so far he would have won to safety unless overtaken by sheer physical exhaustion. I felt the tragedy of the thing; so near and yet so far. And the old story of the manuscript became

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vividly real to me with this witness at my feet of a victim trapped to death. I glanced at the end of the paper for the fellow's name. Meadows, I made out—Carey Meadows—and inscribed in thicker letters so that its impression might never fade was a prayer that if he should die, and his body be found, justice might be done on his accursed brother who had shut him there to perish: Commander Evelyn Meadows of the Tiger.

I had no time to think what this might mean, for suddenly I became aware that the tide had risen; high up the slope as I was, the water was feeling about my ankles. So engrossed had I been in my strange discovery that I hadn't noticed the waters creeping up over my feet. Hastily I scrambled down the steep fall to find myself trapped in the next pocket, with the water already over the mouth of it. Perforce I dropped my lantern,

and in sudden darkness dived beneath the arch and rose into blackness on the other side, where again I pressed forward in utmost alarm, for I was blindly stumbling and slipping. Then the roof came down against my head, again forcing me beneath the water. Once more I dived, but rose only to crack my head against the rock, with no space of air to breathe in. I was almost choking for want of breath, but I kicked out frenziedly against the pressing rock, sinking down and down until at last I felt the roof rise up again, and I knew I was in the next pocket. With my lungs near bursting I splashed my way up to the surface, where fortunately there was room for my head to clear the water. There I rested for a moment gulping in the dank air; but fearing to delay plunged once again beneath the arch, and so up into the fifth pocket, and on to the next. It was a terrible journey, but at length I came out into the open way, almost sobbing with terror, but knowing that now I was safe.

I sank upon a rock to recover my breath, and at last felt my

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courage return to me, and even laughed at the adventure, though I knew well I had played a close match with death. Then I stripped off my soaking garments, and dived for the last time, rising to the good daylight in Ebb-Tide Pool, where for a long while I lay out on a hot rock and basked in the sun, till feeling a desire for dinner I set off for my clothes which I had left on the platform above the pool.

I climbed out on to the great rock by the way I had learnt. I was still a few feet from the platform when I saw a face looking down at me from above. It was hastily withdrawn, but the surprise nearly upset me, and I swung, clinging by my finger-tips, to the face of the rock. Then gathering my strength I tightened my grip, and was once more climbing steadily upwards, when I heard a terrible cry above me and the sound of scuffling feet. My curiosity was aroused, and I tugged myself up in a last effort. Just as I was about to swing myself on to the platform I saw two figures swaying above me, locked in a deadly struggle. I clung to my perch, half fearing they would topple on to me. Then I recognized Dirk. Immediately I knew what had happened: at last he had tracked his quarry to earth. I saw the huge fellow slowly bending his enemy back over the edge of rock, so that his body was curved like a bow. The man's right hand was raised, and in it gleamed a knife; but Dirk had him firmly gripped by the wrist. As I looked I saw the knife-hand slowly opening with the pressure of Dirk's

fingers upon it. At last the knife slipped free and fell to his feet, and the empty hand spread wide with the palm turned full towards me.

And across the palm were two jagged scars.

In a fever of frenzied excitement I heaved myself on to the platform, and drawing my knife shouted, "Let him go, Dirk! Let him go! Let me kill him! He's mine!"

CHAPTER XXXI

EXPIATION

MY sudden interruption might have been fatal, for Dirk in his surprise loosened his hold, and his antagonist nearly slipped free, and stooping had his fingers within an inch of the fallen knife. But Dirk recovered in time; and now that his enemy's sting had been drawn he crushed him tight in his tremendous arms, and had leisure holding him so to question my strange conduct; for I was still dancing madly about him, a naked figure save for my belt, crying, "Let him go! Let me kill him!"

"Steady, lad," said Dirk slowly, while the little fellow in his arms writhed unavailingly, darting from his eyes such a fury of malignant passion that his very gaze seemed poisonous. And I looking upon him recognized that evil face I had three times seen.

"He killed my father," I cried to Dirk.

"Can't fathom that, kid," said Dirk. "It's the King's Man."

"But I know," I shouted. "I saw the marks on his hand."

"I too," said Dirk. But I knew he was referring to the mark of the fire. Still excitedly urging Dirk to let me have the killing of the fellow I yet had space in my mind, for the thought that I knew now where the mark of the fire had come from. It was from that night in the blazing hut where my father had burnt his hand. Evidently the old witch hadn't crawled free without a trace of the flames. All that part of

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the story was instantaneously clear to me. The fellow had betrayed the smugglers, as my father had said, so as to cast suspicion on him; and had laid a snare for him by informing the smugglers that they would know their betrayer by the mark of the fire on his hand. But the sign that was to have betrayed my father had merely served to lead his enemy into his own trap.

All this was a mere flash of thought. I didn't cease crying to Dirk, "I tell you; look at his right hand; inside. There's the marks of the nails."

Dirk pressed at the clenched fist, and slowly the fingers opened, revealing those two jagged tell-tale scars. I opened out my own hand beside that of my enemy's for Dirk to see, for he knew the story of that chase across the sands.

“Yus,” he said at length, “you’re right, kiddo. It’s the same cove we’ve been after all the time. But I dessay you’d better let me have the settling of him.”

“No, no,” I cried, for my thirst for vengeance, so easily allayed, was whipped into a madness at the actual sight of my father’s murderer.

Dirk still delayed, gripping the fellow in his huge embrace, while I continued to cry, “Let me, Dirk, let me. I can fight him. I’ll kill him.”

All this while the look in the man’s eyes was altogether incomprehensible. For Dirk he had nothing but the evillest hatred I had ever seen on any face; yet for me he had a look almost of tenderness. But his countenance was so shifting in its expression that it wasn’t the same for half a minute together. In my frenzy I noticed little of this at the time, except that it seemed to me that he felt some kind of wicked gratitude for my appeal to Dirk to spare him so that I might settle my own account of blood. I guessed he spied a loophole

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of safety, as he would only have a boy to fight. This imagined slight which I sensed in his contempt for me angered me the more, till I fevered for his blood.

Eventually my clamouring prevailed upon Dirk, though I could see he was unwilling to let me risk myself in fight against the fellow. But as he said, “You’ve more to pay than I have, Tommy. You have first claim.”

I picked up the man’s knife and springing back as Dirk released him tossed it to him. He caught it by the handle in true fashion. Then naked as I was I faced him, and we circled round one another with eyes fixed blazingly to each other’s eyes. Dirk stood aside, but ready to leap in if the fellow showed signs of attempting to escape. And indeed I think that was his purpose. For at first he didn’t try to aim a blow at me; and once I saw his eyes turn for the fraction of a second to where the cliff dropped sheer from his feet. I believe he would have plunged and swum for it, but I drove in swiftly and gashed him down the arm. I heard Dirk’s “Bravo!” but I knew I had done foolishly to wound and not to kill, for the fellow’s anger was sharpened, and I saw the glow of hate in his eyes flash on me for a second as I had seen it burn against Dirk. Moreover, he began to press me, and I had to give ground. Twice he lunged in, but I caught his wrist in time and sprang away. And in my turn I feinted and struck, but he was too quick for me. I began to feel he was a master of knife-work such as I had never

seen before. My father had been quick in our mock battles, and Dirk had shown me something of what could be done in agility and parrying and swift counterfeit. But this lithe, swarthy creature, who circled stealthily about me and sprang in and away with the lightness of a cat, was far nimbler and subtler than either Dirk or my father. I found myself breathing heavily

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as he leapt in and closed with me, and bounded back and in again before I had well recovered from the first assault. He kept me dancing to right and left and backwards and forwards without a moment's pause, till the upshot of the fight became at first sadly uncertain and then terribly sure. I knew that sooner or later he must slip past my guard; and since that first mistake of his I hadn't once touched him. Gradually I lost the power of reasoning the situation. At first I had been alert enough, judging for the spring in, watching for the attack; but now I found myself mechanically dodging and parrying, till at last I wondered what possessed him not to drive in and settle the unequal combat. He seemed to be merely playing with me, for I knew that my life was in his hands. Was he afraid of Dirk's vengeance if he should kill me? And then dully the thought came to me that he was waiting for the double chance, at one moment to strike and to escape. That meant he must drive me to the edge of the platform, where with a blow he might finish me and leap into the pool below. But I was determined to thwart him. I steered away to the rise of the cliff, but immediately he wedged me away from it, and I knew my surmise was correct. I felt desperate. Gradually he was forcing me to the edge, and I knew that once there he wouldn't delay the fatal stroke. Then with the fear of death upon me I suddenly grew strong again, calm even. I remembered Jenny, and said I would not die. I knew just what I would do. I gave ground, and he came stepping after me, his eyes glowing with assurance of victory; then trusting to his confidence to slacken his caution, and even quivering my lip in a semblance of fear, I leapt in, and pretending to stumble dropped my knife as he gripped my wrist, but catching it in my left hand struck sideways as Dirk

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had taught me, and felt my blade jab at his ribs as it sank into his breast.

For a moment I thought my end had come. His knife was brandished high over my head, and I had no hand free to stay the impending blow. But

the arm above me faltered and fell limp. The knife slipped and rattled to my feet. It bounced on the rock, rolled, and fell away over the edge to splash far down beneath me in the water.

The man collapsed, a huddled bundle. But as he fell he rested his eyes on mine in such a piteous and reproachful look that I started back half conscience-stricken at my deed, and with all the hate ebbed out of my heart.

So he lay, and with one ugly choke of blood was dead.

Dirk stepped up and slapped me on the back, and said, "Wull, you've robbed me of my vengeance, kiddy. I wish to God he had another life. He wouldn't slip out of it with a little prick like this." And he spurned the blood-soaked corpse with his foot.

"Don't, Dirk, don't!" I cried in horror. He stepped back looking amazedly at me, and saying, "Wull, strike me, Tommy! What's the game now, eh? Aren't you satisfied?" Then I think seeing the agony in my face he added, "Come Tommy, you've played fair. Thank the Almighty for staking on your side, an' me for teaching you the trick, an' yourself for learning it all so pat an' neat." But his words were lost on me; for I was gazing on the dead man's face, where death was busy smoothing out the evil lines of hate, till the lips grew gentle and the glazing eyes almost merry as though the fellow were amused at the contemplation of some hidden irony underlying the tragedy.

Dirk was repeating, "It wasn't the prick of a knife he'd a got from me. Six hours. *Six hours!* ..." I knew of what

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he was thinking, and dimly realized that although his blood was upon my hands I had saved the poor wretch from a terrible fate.

And then I gave a cry, and stooped over the body, gazing deep into the eyes; for the face was the face of Picardino.

Picardino! And then, of course, I could read so many things clearly which before had been covered in shadow. It was Picardino who had set fire to the *Snow Man*. It was Dirk who had been on his track and had frightened him in the night when my father had returned and whistled to me. It was Picardino who had seen my father rush into the burning building, and had heard my cry of "Daddy, dad-dee!" as I ran up through the crowd. He had kept the scene in his memory and had planned the ruse that had trapped my father at last. It was Picardino too who had drawn both

Dirk and Worthing to Naples. It wasn't luck merely that had brought about the fatal error. For it was outside Picardino's lodging that Worthing's uncle had been waiting for his quarry, and had found me instead. And yet I couldn't help the thought that it was Picardino who would have sheltered me after he had killed my father, and who had brought me Jenny's message, so that in my gratitude I had even embraced him. My father he had hated to the death, but me he had loved; of that I felt certain. Perhaps that was why he had been so unwilling to strike. Perhaps even at the end it had paralysed the blow which might so easily have fallen on my unprotected heart. Picardino!

I gazed at him in a mist of sadness and wonder, till the face seemed to change again. Indeed in life as he had gazed from Dirk to me I had noticed its shifting mobility of expression, and in death it seemed to be settling back through all its stages from the hate that had last inspired it to whatever might have

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been its ruling emotion in life. Now the amusement was yielding to a calm and serene content. And of a sudden it was no longer the face of Picardino, but the face of Abou that stared up at me. In spite of all absence of that mighty beard which had veiled the living Abou, I knew him now as he lay dead. Dimly I remembered how Dirk had said that the fellow had more shapes than a cloud and more voices than the wind.

Abou! And now the shadow lifted further. The whole mystery lay bare to me, except indeed the motive which had driven him to kill my father. For now I knew how it was that Dirk had made that mistake at Sunset Towers. It was Abou he had been stalking that night. It was Abou who had been crouched in the darkness of the archway beside me. It was Abou who in the person of Picardino had told of the haunted house, hoping that my father would be led into the trap, thinking the mysterious mansion a good hiding-place. It might even have been Abou who impersonated the landlord; and it was certainly he who knew the secret of the passage, and whose reflection in the mirror I had fired at that night. It was Abou, too, who had deceived even Jenny, when as Picardino he had promised to find me and deliver her message. It was Abou who had taken the manuscript to Sunset Towers where Worthing or his uncle had found it. Indeed it must have been one of them I had heard that evening in Jenny's room. Worthing must have guessed something of the bond that united the Captain's story with my

father's, and with the clue I had given him of the opening of the secret passage he had been able to search for the connecting link at Sunset Towers. Either he or his uncle; which, I should never know. But the card with the Captain's address had been discovered, and so they had been able to trace Abou in London.

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And lastly I remembered it was Abou who had asked to be sent back to his own people, because of the persecution of Dirk, I assumed; and it was in pursuit of him that we had sailed away to the East. But in his amazing intuition he had felt his master needed him again, and he had turned back on his journey; and it was his trail we had followed to such a tragic end at Naples. Yes, it was all quite clear except for the motive. Again I told myself that Abou loved me, though he had hated my father. It was he who had been the go-between when Jenny and I had quarrelled; it was he who had smoothed over the angry passages by his calm voice and gentle manner. And I had killed him! Yet it was some consolation to know that at least I had saved him from a death far more horrible than the one I had dealt him. Abou! Picardino! They had both loved me, and I could have loved them well, had not this thwart and evil destiny set us as enemies against each other.

How long I would have stayed there linking up the story, I don't know. I suppose Dirk stood silently by in deference to my obvious grief at the work of my hands; and perhaps something of the strange transformation in the face of the dead man held him, too, in a wonder of conjecture. But at last his patience was exhausted. Supposing, as I imagine, that a strong command was what was needed to put backbone into my collapsed will, he said sharply, "You put on that gear of yours, and tramp. I know the best hole for this." He nodded down at the corpse, and jerked his thumb at the pool below. I knew he meant to hide the body in Drift-Wood Cavern, and the knowledge hurt me.

"No," I cried.

He faced me sternly, and I hung my head. Indeed I knew there was no other way unless I wished to swing. So I began

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mechanically pulling on my clothes, while Dirk shouldered the dead man and set off down the cliff.

When I was dressed I wiped my knife in the earth. Drawing my various weapons, my pistol, my stiletto, and the knife I had just cleaned, I looked mournfully at them, knowing full well how I delighted in them, yet hating the use to which I had so far put them. I stuffed them back into my belt in disgust, and climbed up the cliff to the *Dolphin*.

I walked slowly, though I was famishing with hunger, and felt the need of a stiff glass of spirits. My mind was in a tumult, still questioning the dark affair. The course of things was clear; but the motive? Abou, I said, was merely his master's shadow. Somehow I knew that what he had done must have been for the Captain, not for himself. For the Captain he had changed from a suave and gracious minister of comfort to the semblance of that hateful old witch, and had ruthlessly sacrificed, not my father only, but the unoffending smugglers, in his zeal to serve his master. Well, he had expiated his sacrifice and his sin. And yet what had the Captain to do with it? Why had he set Abou to kill my father? And how would it affect my love for Jenny? Now not only was Worthing's blood between us, but my father's blood as well. What was my part to be? Must I take another step forward, wade deeper into the river of blood, and kill the Captain? But that I knew I could never do. Yet why had he killed my father?

It was a sudden illumination that gave me the last link I needed. I remembered the story I had deciphered in the tunnel under the earth only an hour ago. An hour ago? It seemed an age! I remembered, too, the tale Worthing's uncle had told me that night beneath the stars: the tale of the Captain and his brothers. Captain Field—Commander

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Meadows! The disguise was so ludicrously thin that I even laughed aloud when the two names met and mingled in my mind. In that cave of accursed gold was buried the Captain's deadly secret, the secret that had tortured him through life, the secret of his murdered comrades, of his murdered brother. He dared not let another meddle with the thing. The thought of prying eyes in that dark place of crime and death was like a madness in his blood; a madness I could well conceive, for I had heard my father tell so often the story of the Mad Captain, and among his papers was that other yarn which told of the ruthless hunting of the treasure-seeker by one who had no cause to hate him except that he feared the exposing of the secret that had poisoned all his life. Had my father guessed the motive of his relentless

persecution, I asked myself; or was it but a fancy that had made him write that yarn? That was something I would never know.

My thoughts were in a strange tangle when I arrived at the *Dolphin*, and even my emotions were clashing conflictingly in my soul. On the one hand I saw the cruel and useless murder of my father as a thing crying for revenge. But again so steeped with repetition had I been in the agonies of the Mad Captain that I felt he couldn't have done otherwise than he did. The anguish in his soul had goaded him on to a cruelty he hadn't contemplated. Perhaps even some cause I didn't know had made him commit that first dreadful crime of imprisoning his comrades in the cave and leaving them there to perish so miserably. Again I thought how strange it was that history had repeated itself. The first crime the priest had told of was the same as the last I had read that day. The circle was complete, as though the curse had worked itself to a consummation; and I was determined that it should end now once for all. I would burn all traces of the clue to the treasure

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cave. I wouldn't touch a penny of the evil gold if it should come my way. And come my way I thought it might, as I knew the Captain was fond of me. And puzzling out his fondness I thought at first it was merely that he had been desirous to make amends; but later I felt sure he had come to like me for my own sake. Well, what my course was to be I couldn't say. Was a further expiation required? If so, I vowed some other hand than mine should strike the blow.

At that I thought of Worthing who would have uncompromisingly declared that blood must atone for blood. Was that the reason, I asked myself, why my father's murder had sunk into insignificance with him? Had he come on the trail of a greater crime? Was it for that he had hunted down Abou, as he thought, promising him life if he would tell the secret of the entrance? It wasn't gold he was after; that I felt sure of. Was it justice?

With these questions tumultuously buzzing in my mind I reached the *Dolphin*, wearily climbed the stairs, and opened the door of my room. Facing me as I entered was the Captain himself. Without realizing what I was doing I exclaimed:

"Commander Meadows!" In a frightened whisper I added, "Of the *Tiger*."

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CHAPTER XXXII

INTO THE MORNING

I SAW a smile of greeting change into a grimace of stupefied dismay. My mind went back to the morning when in the kitchen just beneath us I had blurted out, "The smugglers!" I stood horrified at what I had done. This dismay on the Captain's face grew into an expression of savage cunning, and I knew that all the deviltry of his lifelong madness was roused to a ferocious passion. His head sank below his shoulders; his hands curled and stiffened like the claws of an enraged beast; his eyes at first swelled glaringly from their sockets, then sank back beneath the half-closed lids in a terrible scrutiny of menace. And suddenly he sprang upright with his hands thrown behind his head, and burst into a peal of demoniac laughter more terrifying than the brutal crouching of his first posture. And still I stood motionless watching him.

His frenzied mirth subsided at length into broken gigglings, hysterical and unnatural. Tottering a little he felt about for a chair and sat down heavily. Then drawing out a huge kerchief he mopped his brow which was beaded over with perspiration, and still faintly chuckling said, "Ha, yes, excellent; excellent, indeed. That's good, Tommy; that's a good joke, a really good joke, 'pon my soul." He threw back his head and forced out a harsh laugh.

I took a step forward. "Sir," I began, wondering how I might undo the evil I had done. But at that he sprang up, and his savage madness returned upon him.

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"Stand back," he cried in a terrible voice, "stand back. I know you, I know who you are. You think you can fool me, do you? You think I don't know you, eh? God in heaven, what do you take me for, sir?" With his curled fingers digging at the air as though to tear away some obstructing veil he stared at me with reddening eyes, and went on, "Ha, yes, you think you look like Tommy, do you? But I know you. You would hunt me down, blast your eyes! You would tell me of the bodies lying there. You would put the world upon my track. Ha, you would drag me out into the light, point at me, set men's eyes upon me, name me murderer? So? Murderer, am I?

Killed my own brothers, did I? Trapped them and left them there to die?" His voice rose more shrilly with each word, and he finished with a scream, suddenly covering his face with his hands, "And I did, I did! Oh, God!"

He sank sobbing to the floor. I didn't know what to do. It was terrible, it was piteous. But I knew he was mad, and dared not approach him.

Presently he seemed to regain control of himself. Still huddled on the floor he threw out a hand to me, and looking up at me from flushed and swollen eyes began in a strained, low, monotonous tone, "See here, this is how it was. And you *will* know sooner or later. They'd have killed me. I tell you, they'd have killed me. Yes, my own brothers would have killed me for the gold. But I found out how it lay. I trapped them there. But one escaped; the youngest. I loved him. I tell you, I loved the boy. And he would have killed me for the gold. I tell you ..." He broke off. His head fell between his hands. "You don't believe me," he moaned reproachfully, "you don't believe a word I say."

"Sir," I cried, "I do believe you."

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Slowly he peered up at me, and I saw a wicked gleam lighten his face.

"So," he said. "Then come and kiss me, boy."

I think I would have ventured all and gone to him to see if I might pacify his tortured spirit, but I remembered how once before he had snared me so at Sunset Towers. I held back doubtfully, though I yearned to run to him and comfort him. At my hesitation his face grew frightful. He sprang to his feet and cried, "He hates me. Tommy hates me because I killed his father. I killed ..." He stopped short, and staring at me said deliberately, "You lie. It's all a lie. I didn't kill him. My name is Field; Captain Field, I'd have you know. And the crying you hear at night, Tommy, it's the ghost. You know it's the ghost?"

"Yes, sir," I said, "I've seen it." For I thought to lead his mind back to earlier associations.

But he chuckled to himself and said, "Little fool! Seen it, eh? Little fool!"

The thought seemed to amuse him. He laughed quietly for a while. Then again I saw his eyes slanting round at me. He stopped laughing, and gazing at me stupidly, said, "Still here, eh? What do you want with me, eh? God in heaven, can't you say what you want?"

He stood so for a moment, and I couldn't say a word.

Then he passed his hands across his eyes, and his face took on a look of horror. "Tommy?" he asked. "Isn't it Tommy?"

"Yes, sir," I said, "I'm Tommy."

"Liar!" he cried. "Liar! I know you. Pah! There's the smell of blood in the air. You've come from the grave, from the grave down there in the woods. I know. Why can't you leave me in peace? Why must you follow me? They

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told me it was quiet in the grave. Why can't you lie still? Why can't you rest? What have I done to you? What have I ever done to you that you should follow me like this? Yes, always follow me? Away, I say; away!"

He sprang towards me with his hands before his eyes, lurching blindly as though afraid to face me. I slipped to one side, and we changed places. He removed his hands, and looking before him thought for a moment I had gone, "Ha," he muttered, "I thought I saw him. I must be going mad." Then he turned. I thought he would have fallen dead at my feet. With mouth foaming and eyes staring he tottered dizzily forward and collapsed to the floor without a struggle. I would have stepped to him, but he lifted his face and looked furtively up at me from under his brows, and said in a brokenhearted voice, "I tell you I'm sorry. I can't say more. It had to be. Blood breeds blood. You should have taken the money and gone away. But you took the money and followed me. Always you followed. What could I do?"

I knew he was mistaking me for my father. Perhaps I was really growing more like my father, or perhaps it was just his guilty imagination tricking him. But I said once more, "Sir, I'm Tommy."

He lay crouched on the floor, breathing heavily, and watched me for a minute or two. I thought his mind was clearing. "Tommy," he muttered, "Jenny's Tommy. You'll be rich, Tommy; you'll be rich. And you needn't fear. You're not to blame, boy. It's evil gold, and there's a curse on it; but it won't hurt you. There's no blood upon your hands. Thank God for that, boy; thank God for that. You take the gold, and ask no questions. Your father asked too many questions. I gave him gold, but he would ask questions. That's dangerous, boy."

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He scrambled unsteadily to his feet, and said, "Come and kiss me, Tommy."

But again the memory of that pursuit round the table held me doubtfully back. Now there was no Abou to lead the Captain away if he meditated treachery. The hesitation was fatal. He burst out into a torrent of reproach: "Tommy hates me. He won't believe me. I say they would have murdered me, but he won't believe me. Oh, Tommy, Tommy! My boy! And I loved you." With a sobbing cry he burst through the door and away into the woods, where I heard his voice echoing brokenly in a dying wail.

I was too exhausted to follow. I sat down where I was, and burying my face in my hands yielded to a weak self-pity. My whole life lay in pieces at my feet. I had killed those that had loved me best, driven on by a fate that had blinded and mastered me. Through no sin of my own I felt the clinging guiltiness of blood upon my hands. Ahead of me I saw no cleansing, no healing. For now blackened out of my life was the one bright gleam that had cheered me forward: my love for Jenny. There would be no Jenny for me any more. A terrible river of blood lay between us. The bridge of reconciliation that might have spanned it I had destroyed with my own hands. If I had stifled my suspicions and gone to the Captain when he had called me, all might have been well. But I had closed the one door that he had opened. I had refused the hand he had offered. I had sealed my own fate.

Jenny's Tommy, he had named me. The name stirred bitterly at my heart. I remembered how Jenny had sent me forth to find her father's foe. I remembered, too, how I had believed I had found him and killed him, but had only killed my own friend. The irony of the thing had stung me at the time. But now it seemed that the whole conclave of the fates were

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heaving in laughter; for I had succeeded only in tracking down myself. I had been hunting myself about the world. I was the man I had promised to kill. I thought I couldn't do better than fulfil my promise. Jenny's Tommy! There would be no Jenny for me.

How Dirk found me I needn't relate; nor how he took me back to London, comforting me in his rough way when by broken fragments I gave him all my story. He saw nothing to mope over. "Girls," he said, "don't let a spot o' blood upset them." But I couldn't bring myself to face Jenny. Not

merely was I afraid of meeting the Captain again, but the thought of naming love to Jenny sickened and disgusted me.

I was awakened into some kind of alertness when, after we had been in London some days, Dirk told me the Captain hadn't returned to his home. He knew the house, for he had tracked Abou there before he had set out for the *Dolphin* on his last journey. Jenny had been left in the care of the maid, while the Captain, too restless to wait for Abou to find me, had followed him after some days of fretful anxiety. Jenny, Dirk had learnt, was still awaiting her father, unconscious of the tragedy that had befallen him.

The news set me packing. I announced to Dirk that I was off to Sunset Towers to seek the Captain, for I knew where he must have gone, and I dreaded what might have happened to him. Dirk offered to take me on the brig, but I asked him merely to sail to the Rancey and await me there. Somehow I felt I must make the journey alone. The thought of company was like the rubbing of rough garments on an open wound for I seemed to be embarked on a pilgrimage of atonement, I determined to find the Captain, and mad or sane I would

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beg his forgiveness, and close for ever the terrible account of blood that lay between us.

Full of this resolve I travelled slowly northwards. On the way I repeated the whole story to myself, having all the clue in my hands now, even the mystery of my father's little fortune, which had evidently been hush money paid by the Captain to turn him from his quest. I felt chastened and subdued, unable to fix the blame. My father had certainly not offended to the penalty of death; and on the other hand the Captain, whipped to a madness at the memory of the crime he had been forced into, so much against his kindly nature as I knew, wasn't to be charged to the full with the blood he had shed to cover his traces. "Blood breeds blood," he had said. There was a fatality in the affair. My sympathy went out to him, for my father's stories had so stimulated my imagination that I could put myself in the Captain's place. Goaded as he had been I knew I should have acted as he had done. Nor could I reproach Abou for his mistaken devotion to an evil duty. Indeed something like admiration for him welled up in my heart when I thought how he had put aside his calm serenity of mind to dog his master's enemy year after year with the knife of murder in his hand, when his whole nature I believed craved for quietness and peace. And what a

pursuit it had been! I had only glimpsed it by fleeting scenes, when those two superb trackers, the hunter and the hunted, had emerged for a moment into the daylight from their dark and tortuous burrowings underground. But the course of that tremendous chase, the shifts and wiles and dodges of that pair of consummate actors, had been a drama for the gods above, and none but they could tell its story. And so as I thought of these things I felt as I had so often felt before that I was moving in the presence of something more than human. The strange

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hatred, the madness, the bewildering unreason of the combat between those men who had no cause to wrong each other turned my mind back to the old tale of the curse. I yielded to the superstition, otherwise there was no accounting for the feud: it was that ancient malediction that had exacted such a penalty of blood.

When I arrived at Sunset Towers all was deathly still. There was no trace of the Captain upstairs or downstairs. For a while I thought my pilgrimage had been in vain. Then I remembered the secret chamber, and knew at once that, of course, the Captain would have taken refuge there. With my stiletto I had little difficulty in finding and penetrating the hole through the worm-eaten panel in the old oak wardrobe. I pressed back the lever which lifted the bar, and the door swung easily open. I listened for a moment wondering whether I had been overheard; if so the Captain might be waiting for me at the top of the narrow stairs. But all was still, and I ascended into the dark. I hesitated at the top, then boldly pushed open the door. The Captain lay on the bed, his face turned to the skylight, his hand gripping a dagger which was buried up to the hilt in his heart.

There was little to do. He had paid the forfeit, and was at rest. When I recovered from the shock I searched among his papers. I found a copy of his will bequeathing his property to Jenny and myself, with the hope strongly expressed that, some day, we might marry each other, and so reunite the divided inheritance. I knew his real meaning was that the feud might be healed in reconciliation.

I put the will into my pocket, but vowed never to touch a penny of that unhallowed gold. I hoped, too, I might persuade Jenny to forswear her share. That would be the last

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service I could do her, for I couldn't see the Captain's desire being fulfilled.

Then there seemed only one thing left to do. I searched the cellars and grounds for oil and firewood, and stacking the fuel up the stairs, and flinging open all the doors and windows, I set a light to the stuff, using as a brand first the manuscript that had caused all the evil, and then the paper I had found on the skeleton in Drift-Wood Cavern.

With the building once well ablaze I set off for the sea, turning at every few steps to look behind me to satisfy myself that the flames were mastering the great ruinous pile, wiping bare for ever all traces of the crime which had begun there with the finding of the manuscript and ended there with the suicide of the Captain.

As I left the place farther and farther behind I couldn't help thinking of that other fire I had watched as my father carried me away from the blazing hut in the woods where first I had consciously become aware of the tangled net in which my life had been so strangely and tragically involved. And here with fire I was freeing myself from the net for ever. And so I kept casting back over my shoulder to watch the flames, till at last even the smoke rising in a thick column to the clouds was merely a patch of blurred shadow on the skyline.

Then again I thought of Jenny. I began to wonder how I should break the news to her. How was I to tell her the story? For I mustn't wound her love for her father, yet I must be just to my own. The picture of the lonely little girl cast out upon the world with none to protect her took violent hold upon my pity. I yearned towards her, yet knew deep in my heart that to speak to her of love would be to stab her afresh in her still-bleeding wound.

I was utterly weary in body, utterly dejected in spirit,

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when I reached the sea. I found Dirk waiting me in a shore-side tavern. I told him my story. The night was falling as we rowed out to the brig. I retired to my bunk, where I lay a long while sorrowfully tossing, and at last fell into a troubled sleep.

With the chill of the morning I was up again, cheered at heart as always at the sight of the good day. I ran out on deck. And there before me was Jenny.

I stopped short, thinking my eyes were deceiving me. But she walked gravely up to me and said, "Dirk brought me, Tommy. He has told me everything."

"Everything?" I repeated.

"Yes," she said.

"And yesterday ..." I began.

"Yesterday, too," she said.

For a minute or two we faced each other in silence. Then I began again.

"I have your father's will," I told her.

"Dirk showed it me," she replied.

"But, Jenny," I went on, "you mustn't touch the gold. It's evil."

"I don't want the gold," she declared, breaking from her coldness and speaking with a sudden passion.

I looked at her keenly, for there was something unspoken behind her emotion.

"Then we must say good-bye, I suppose?" I announced, not supposing any such thing, yet half turning from her. At that she spoke with something of her old imperiousness.

"You're very stupid, Tommy," she cried. "My father killed your father, and your father killed my father."

"No," I contradicted.

"Yes," she insisted, "it was so. And so that's all finished."

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We must try and begin again. Daddy wants us to. He says so in the will."

At that I flung my arms about her. And in the flush of that wonderful moment I seemed to steer suddenly free of the dark shadow of Fear that had closed my life around ever since I could remember, and sailed out into the clean sweet air, with the breaking dawn about me.

Of the rest what need I say? For how we sailed away to the sun and the south; and how for three years I increased in knowledge of seamanship, and put on bulk and muscle, while Jenny grew in sweetness and beauty and grace; and how Dirk taught me the ways of traffic and barter, till at length I sailed back to England with a neat little fortune of my own; and how Dirk retired and bought an inn, and the *Revenge* was bequeathed to me and became the *Jenny* brig; all this and much more that followed belongs to another story which I may tell some later day.

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About the Author



Henry Burgess Drake (1894-1963) was a UK teacher, Orientalist and author, in active service during World War One, who wrote occasional Fantasy tales involving the occult. His most successful novel was probably the non-genre *Chinese White* (1950) as Burgess Drake, set in China during World War Two; but he is primarily remembered today for his first novel *The Remedy* (1925; and *The Shadowy Thing* 1928) because of its influence on H P Lovecraft. A young man with strong powers of Hypnosis inadvertently causes a fellow student to become possessed by an inhuman intelligence, leading to his insanity and death; the hypnotist proceeds to bring other people under his control, and finally, during World War One, escapes death by means of an Identity Transfer to the severely war-mutilated body of an acquaintance. The influence can be clearly seen in Lovecraft's "The Shadow out of Time" (June 1936 *Astounding*) and "The Thing on the Door-step" (January 1937 *Weird Tales*).

Other works of genre interest include *Cursed Be the Treasure* (1926), about a haunted pirate's treasure which protects itself from predators; *The Captain of the "Jehovah"* (1936), involving native Magic aboard a slave ship; *The Book of Lyonne* (1952) as Burgess Drake, a children's fantasy illustrated by Drake's long-time friend Mervyn Peake; *Hush-a-by Baby* (1952; and *Children of the Wind* 1954) as Burgess Drake, about a woman

haunted by the spirits of her miscarried twins; and *The Woman and the Priest* (1955) as Burgess Drake, concerning a struggle between forces of good and evil for spiritual dominance on a small French island. Drake also wrote the short Horror story “Yak Mool San” (1949 *The London Mystery Magazine* #1). He was the godfather of Peake’s daughter.

Other works include:

The Remedy (London: John Long, 1925)

The Shadowy Thing (New York: Macy-Masius/The Vanguard Press, 1928)

Cursed Be the Treasure (London: John Lane, 1926)

Captain of the “Jehovah” (New York: Greenberg Publishing, 1936)

The Book of Lyonne (London: Falcon Press, 1952) as Burgess Drake

Hush-a-by Baby (London: Falcon Press, 1952) as Burgess Drake

Children of the Wind (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: J P Lippincott, 1954) as Burgess Drake

The Woman and the Priest (London: Peter Davies, 1955) as Burgess Drake

